



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N.Y.

No. 17.

Price, Five Cents

JESSE JAMES' CAVE

OR
THE SECRET OF THE DEAD



BY
W. S. LAWSON

JESSE JAMES AND HIS MEN RUSHED INTO THE CAVE, AND SEIZED THE BANKER JUST AS HE WAS BEING DRAWN UP BY THE ROPE.



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JESSE JAMES' CAVE;

OR,

The Secret of the Dead.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE SECRET OF THE DEAD.

The night is dark, and having groped my way to a stone that will serve as a seat, I make myself as comfortable as possible while awaiting the turn of events.

In the eastern sky there is a yellow flush that indicates the coming of the old moon, due just before the midnight hour.

While seated here, I can catch the crowing of a rooster over the rise, on some farm, while from another quarter comes the barking of a Minnesota watchdog.

Around me all is silent.

Why should it not be so, since I am in the city of the dead—the cold resting-place I have utilized being a flat tombstone!

The moon peeps into view.

It illuminates the dreary scene.

A country graveyard always has a sort of fascination

for me, even in the daytime, and when I look upon it in the moonlight, this feeling is intensified.

By profession I am a detective, and when I seek such pastures, it is not because a morbid curiosity draws me thither, but on account of business.

Being possessed of strong nerves, and a skeptic with regard to all things supernatural, I have an advantage over most persons.

A sound comes to my ear.

There is a church connected with the graveyard, as is customary in country places—an old building, with vines trailing over it.

In the tower is a clock.

It is this marker of time's passage I now hear, beating the hour.

I count the strokes vibrating on the air, not because I am in doubt as to what the result will be, but in a purely mechanical way.

Twelve!

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It is the solemn hour of midnight.

Satisfied, I arise from my retired seat, and move off in a certain direction.

What my business in this place may be, the immediate future will disclose.

My advance is not made boldly.

On the contrary, I take advantage of everything that comes in my way, that will shield me.

This indicates danger.

The cemetery is quite a large one, but I soon pass across it, and reach a certain corner where the weeping willows grow more luxuriantly than at any other point.

This is my destination.

Under the willows I will find what I seek, unless my speculations are wrong.

All is quiet as death.

I can see the outlines of a tomb of some kind, and creeping near, find it the hiding-place in the bushes.

Then I possess my soul in patience and wait.

It is lonesome work under such circumstances.

The moon mounts higher.

Finding an entrance through the heavy growth of willow, a wandering ray of light falls upon the stout door of the tomb.

I watch it traveling down in its slanting course.

Just as it nears the bottom, voices reach my ear.

The event I have anticipated is about to occur.

Closer come the voices.

Cowering there in the bushes, I await the coming of the speakers, knowing full well that they will bring up at this tomb under the weeping willows.

They are now close beside me.

I make out two voices, and calculate that number of men being present.

"Here we are, Silas," says one.

"Not much trouble after all, eh?"

"No. How about the door?"

"Wait."

There is considerable significance connected with this one word.

It is suggestive of skeleton keys and all the paraphernalia peculiar to the burglar's trade.

I no longer see the spot of moonlight on the door of the willow tomb, for the men have come between and blotted it out.

There is a fumbling sound and some low talk between them.

"How's that, Si?"

"Open, as sure as fate. Ugh! what a cold air, and—I tell you, doctor, I don't like the odor either."

"Humbug! all such places are musty and damp. Move in, old man."

"After you, doctor, after you."

"Well, if you're afraid keep hold of my coat-tails, and remember no loud noise unless you wish to have the whole town about our ears like a nest of hornets."

"I'm dumb, doc—lead on."

All this had come to me distinctly.

Being already interested in the game, I have no difficulty in understanding it.

When assured that the two men have entered the tomb, I leave my hiding-place and creep forward.

It is my intention to see and hear what takes place in that weird place, for I have a deep interest in the game.

They have left the door ajar.

When I glance in I have the whole situation spread out before me.

Ordinarily one would suppose that the mission of the twain to a graveyard at such an uncanny hour could have but a certain meaning.

The fact that the leader of the two is a doctor, would emphasize such a supposition.

Have they come thither in the dead of night to steal a body from its resting-place?

I know this is not so.

Another motive, just as sinister in its way, has influenced them.

When I make my observation, they are bending over a coffin that rests upon a couple of wooden horses, though but lately deposited in the resting-place for the dead.

The doctor has brought out from some place of concealment, possibly under his coat, a lighted lantern, which now illuminates the scene.

Their faces are brought out plainly.

Silas is a man with a gray beard—a fellow who evidently does not relish his present position, for he keeps glancing around him in a nervous manner, as though half expecting to see ghosts and goblins spring out of the walls, and throttle him with sinewy fingers for daring to invade the sacred abode of the dead.

Only one thing can have induced him to brave these invisible perils.

This is money.

The "filthy lucre" will cause men to do all manner of things which nothing else could ever influence them to attempt.

His companion, the doctor, is a man considerably younger, though he has an old head.

I can see the marks of dissipation on his face, and understand that Dr. Ben is doubtless a secret consumer of a drug that must finally make him a raving maniac.

Nervously he unscrews the lid of the coffin, all the while keeping up a succession of jokes, as though intent on diverting his companion.

Having come prepared for this business, it is only a matter of a few minutes to accomplish it.

The coffin lid is removed by Silas.

Then both men bend over.

"Lift up the lantern," says the doctor.

His companion obeys.

My position is such that I can readily see as well as themselves.

The inmate of the casket is an old man; to all appearances a gentleman of refinement and probably of wealth, for all the surrounding accompaniments would indicate as much.

These ghouls of the tomb waste no time in examining his countenance; they have come here for a purpose, and this immediately occupies their attention.

I watch the doctor.

Fearlessly he bends over the body.

He appears to be groping about in search of something.

Upon his success or failure my immediate actions depend, and hence it may be assumed that I experience some curiosity to see what the outcome of his search may be.

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Finally he straightens up.

Silas, unable to keep quiet under the dreadful suspense, blurts out:

"What luck, doctor?"

The other gives a cold chuckle.

"I made no mistake, Silas."

"Then you've got it?"

"Yes."

The doctor ceases his search.

As he resumes a natural position, I can see that he holds something in his hand.

It appears to be a paper, in fact there can be no doubt about the matter.

"You see, Silas, I made no mistake."

"That's true, doctor. I'm glad, real glad, you've found the document. P'raps you remember like as how you promised me an extra five in case we was successful."

"Si, make it ten, man."

"That strikes me, doctor. I ain't going to make any objection if ye double it agin."

"Your fears were groundless, Si."

"I own up."

"We haven't been disturbed, you see."

"That's a fact, an' yet I could have sworn some critter overheard our talk.

"All imagination, Si."

"Well, there were the footprints under the open window, the broken vine, and such telltale marks. I only said as how I feared it; the feller as made them tracks might have been prowling round my old shanty before or afterward."

"That was my impression, and I said as much, but you would have it the other way. Bless me, man, if what you feared had come to pass, we'd have found a platoon of police with a cannon drawn up in line at this place, and ready to give us a warm reception."

"Doc, it ain't fair pokin' fun at a feller, when all I wanted to do was to serve you. Great Caesar!"

"What's the matter, man?"

"I thought I seen him move his eyes."

"You're crazy, Si. He's been dead three days. Don't let your imagination make away with your common sense so easily."

"Well, doctor, ain't we done here?"

"I guess so."

"Then let's get."

"I agree. My suspicions have been confirmed, and with this document I shall be able to hold the winning hand. They will laugh no longer. It's worth a fortune to you, Dr. Ben Bailey—a fortune, do you hear, you unlucky disciple of Esculapius, and when you roll in luxury, remember—"

Dr. Ben does not finish his sentence.

CHAPTER II.

OLD REUBEN'S STRANGE GUEST.

The reason is simple enough.

While indulging in this boasting refrain, the doctor flourishes over his head the paper he has so strangely secured, and which contains the secret that was to be buried with the dead.

He has probably had a clew, and discovered the paper

in the lining of the coat upon the figure in the costly casket.

In thus flourishing the document about, it comes very close to my face.

The temptation is too strong.

I have contemplated getting possession of the document in another way, but the sudden chance thus offered finds me a ready taker.

With a sudden and dexterous movement, characterized by a quick sweep of the hand, I manage to snatch the paper from his grasp.

The action gives him a shock, and his foot upsets the lantern, which obediently goes out, leaving them in the dark.

Just as soon as I have felt the paper in my grasp, I conceive the idea of beating a retreat.

This only requires a turn, and with a bound I am behind one of the broad trunks of the willows.

Here the rank grass also serves to conceal me from view.

To accomplish this has taken but a few seconds—an almost unreckoning space of time.

Hardly have I sunk into my hiding-place than my ears are saluted with subdued shrieks.

Silas comes tumbling out of the dark tomb, his arms flying like flails.

"Didn't ye see it, doctor?"

"See what?"

"The imp of Satan that just put out the lantern?"

"Nonsense! I overturned it accidentally."

"You?"

"Yes, with my foot. That isn't the worst of it."

"What else?"

"I didn't overturn that lantern purposely, Si."

"Of course not."

"It was a surprise that made me do it."

"Eh?"

"What was I doing when you last saw me?"

"Waving your hand."

"Above my head?"

"Yes."

"I held something in it, Si."

"I seen it, doc."

"The paper?"

"That's the ticket."

"A hand suddenly snatched that paper from my grasp. I thought perhaps you might have been looking up and seen it."

"Not I. Then, you see, it was as I said."

"As sure as you live, Si, some one must have overheard us. I have been robbed."

"Perhaps we can find the man."

"You are armed?"

"Yes, here's a six-shooter."

"Let me have it, man."

"Be careful, doc. I ain't anxious to have my neck twisted. Up here in Minnesota they don't do things by halves."

"If I can get a sight of the devil that snatched the paper out of my hands, I'm going to make him smart for it, I swear."

I smile at this threat, which does not scare me worth a cent.

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In the first place, they are not apt to discover me, hidden away so securely.

Then, again, I, too, am armed.

Just at this very moment I hold the paper in one hand, while the other clutches a revolver that has stood by me on many occasions, and helped me out of numerous scrapes.

If these two men happen to run across me, they will meet with a reception hot enough to satisfy all desire for gore.

Believing that the unknown man has snatched the doctor's recently acquired treasure from his hand must have immediately fled across the graveyard, they start in pursuit.

I have now ample time to secrete the paper on my person for future inspection, and then quietly pick my way out of the labyrinth that marks this corner of the graveyard.

In choosing this route, I doubtless run little chance of meeting the two men, who are so busily employed searching for the unknown in another part of the large inclosure.

This dismal place has no longer any attractions for me, and I prepare to leave it for good.

If the doctor and his quaking assistant care to keep up the search, they are welcome to scratch around until doomsday, for all I care.

My object has been accomplished.

Reaching the road, I pass down it, keeping on the shaded side, where the trees hide my flitting figure from the moonlight.

Twenty minutes later, I reach a small house that stands by the roadside.

The only living being I have seen has been a horseman, well mounted, and riding in the direction of Northfield.

Coming upon me unexpectedly, where the soft road does not sound the thud of the horse's hoofs, I have no time to hide.

The horseman, without slackening his pace, seems to bend over in his military saddle to glance at me, and I can see that he is a born rider.

"Good-evening," I say, civilly.

He returns the salute, and speeds on, leaving me with a queer feeling around my heart.

The idea is preposterous, and I am crazy to even think of such a thing, but if I didn't know positively he was in Missouri, I'd be ready to swear that bold rider was Jesse James.

That is what I say to myself as I resume my journey up the road.

I have good reason to know the man whose name I thus mention.

Several times have we met face to face, and always as enemies.

When he was a guerrilla under Quantrell, I was on the other side, and during a raid on the den of the jayhawkers, Jesse James and myself had a little duel in which both were wounded.

Twice since then have we met as enemies, and the hatred between us is mutual.

Perhaps deep down in my heart I have a respect for this notorious man's daring and prowess, but it is not fear.

At any rate this feeling may be what causes me to liken the midnight rider to the man whose name is household word in Missouri.

Reaching the house which has been mentioned, I am my way to the door and knock.

The door is immediately opened.

An old man stands here, and shades his eyes with his hand to look at me, for the moon strikes him in the face.

"It's you, Mr. Lawson, I reckon," he says, in a crackling voice.

"Yes," I reply, entering.

"Something strange has happened here since you went out, Mr. Lawson."

Old Reuben knows me well, and would do much to serve me in his way.

His words strike me with surprise.

Mechanically I wonder whether they can have a bearing on the case I am working up.

One's thoughts generally go to what is nearest and dearest on such an occasion, and this business has grossed my attention.

"Tell me about it, Reuben."

I throw myself into a chair, for somehow I feel tired and sleepy after my night's vigil.

At the same time I notice that Reuben is very particular to lock the door, a thing I have never known him to be so careful about before.

He has just turned toward me when my hand touches something on the table that sends an electric shock through my frame.

What is it?

Not a coiled rattlesnake, an infernal machine, nor anything of that ilk.

Simply a woman's bonnet—a fragile bit of a thing with some dainty black lace and a bow of black ribbon.

In itself, nothing suggestive of harm.

It is the circumstances that lend it such a peculiar attraction.

Old Reuben is a bachelor, and I doubt if a female has crossed the threshold of his home for many years save the old colored aunty who does his chores and takes care of him.

Hence this trail.

I pick up the dainty fabric and hold it at arm's length, eying it critically.

Reuben chuckles.

"Has this any connection with the peculiar event that has happened here?"

"Well, I reckon it do, Mr. Lawson."

"Who is she—where did she come from—how did she get here—what is she doing out at this time of night?"

"Mercy!"

"In short, tell me all about it."

"That's just what I meant to do, sir, when you fired all of them questions at me."

"I don't believe you had been gone more than half an hour when there came a knock at the door, and wondering if it was you, I opened it."

"Bless my eyes, there was a young girl, as fine a looking creature as I ever seen."

"She held the bridle of a hoss that had a regular man's saddle on his back, besides a small valise strapped behind."

"She asked for shelter, and would take no refusal, and I hadn't the heart to shut the door in her face.

"So I took the hoss and tied him in the shed back of the house, fetchin' in the bag accordin' to her directions.

"She was sittin' jest whar ye are now, her bonnet off, and her golden curls hanging down to her waist, as purty a picture as I ever see.

"I could easily see something was on her mind, her face looked so determined like.

"When I asked her if she'd like somethin' to eat she said yes, and asked when it would be ready.

"I said in half an hour.

"So she took the valise into the room I told her she might have—yourn, Mr. Lawson—I hope you'll excuse me, but I was so taken aback I hardly knew what I was a-doin'—"

He looks so humble that I have not the heart to get angry with him.

"Go on, Reuben."

"The last I seen of her she went in there an' closed the door.

"I was busy getting some eggs fried, and hardly paid any notice to the clock.

"Just as you did, I was asking myself all manner of questions about the girl, for it was really the queerest thing that had ever happened to me since—well, since I set up here.

"After a while all was ready.

"I set a little table yonder, and made it as neat as I could, for you see there was something about the gal as made me believe she was a lady, and used to the best.

"I was wondering all the while what under the sun you'd say, if you chanced to come in and find that I had a guest.

"Then I remembered that I had put her in your room, and this gave me trouble.

"The plain little meal I had been able to get up was now on the table.

"At any rate, a cup of tea would do her good. I remembered that women folks always like that, and hunted up a package of very fine Oolong, old Molly had hidden away.

"When I seen as all was ready, I stepped up and knocked on the door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The tea is on the table," I replied.

"A thousand thanks—I really need it," she said, and with that the door opens, and out comes—not the sweet girl with the yellow curls I had seen go in, but a dapper boy, roughly dressed, and yet wearing her face."

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.

The old man has enough of the dramatic instinct about him to stop here at this point and witness the effect of such a startling declaration upon me.

Used to such scenes, I only express astonishment in order that he shall not experience disappointment.

"Transformed into a boy, eh?"

"Yes, and, by George, them yellow curls had been clipped off short. If I had met the chap on the road,

I'd a thought he was a boy, sure enough, and a bright one at that."

"You expressed your surprise?"

"Well, I reckon I couldn't help it. She laughed kinder, and said as how I might think it a queer thing for a gal to do, but she had a good reason.

"Then she sat down and eat quite a bite, as chipper as you please, and me a-dyin' to ask her questions, but not daring to.

"When she was done, she arose and laid a five-dollar note on the table.

"That is to pay for your kindness, sir, and silence concerning my conduct. If you were to tell what you have seen, it might be the means of losing my life."

"Of course at that I promised to keep quiet; how could I do anything else?"

"She went out of the house and straight to the shed, mounting her horse like one born a rider.

"As she stopped by the door, she said to me:

"Good-night, sir, and Heaven bless you for befriending a girl in distress. If I find him you will see me again. Should I not come back in three days open the letter I left in the room. It will explain what may seem a mystery."

"Then she galloped away. I wonder you didn't meet her on the road."

His words caused me to remember that I did meet a lone horseman; but when I remember what he looked like I realize at once that he can have no connection with Reuben's strange guest.

"She must have turned down some crossroad, for I saw nothing of her. I am decidedly interested, Reuben, in this girl."

I leave my chair.

For the time being my weariness is forgotten, because something else is on my mind.

Followed by the old man, I enter the room which adjoins the general living one, and which had been given over for my use.

A lamp burns there.

Certain words let fall by the other have aroused old memories within my mind; another vision of golden curls, once very dear to me, crosses my mental sight and almost causes me to groan when I remember that the being to whom they belonged is no more.

Once within the room I seem to feel her presence. There is a faint perfume in the air that makes my head swim, for she used to always call heliotrope her favorite odor.

Alas! that these memories should only be thus aroused to mock me.

I look around.

The satchel Reuben has spoken of lies on the floor, and appears to be filled with clothes.

Upon the floor, just in front of the little bureau, lie a mass of golden curls, where they had fallen when her ruthless hand, seizing upon the scissors, has clipped them every one, and shorn her head like a boy's.

I experience a strange feeling as I reverently pick up these rich golden tresses and lay them across the table.

What has brought her here?

A strange mission she must have on hand to thus disguise herself as a boy.

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I feel an interest in her, even though I have never met her as yet.

While I stand thus and meditate upon the possible cause of her being here, I catch sight of a paper on the table.

At the same time I remember that she spoke to old Reuben concerning a letter she left for him to read if she failed to return in three days.

As he has made no move toward claiming it, I step forward and have it in my possession.

It is in an envelope, and sealed.

On the outside words are written, and as I glance at them my eyes become glued there.

To my friend, the owner of this house.

Kindly open in three days if I fail to return, and learn my secret.

This is what I read. The words were simple enough, but it is the writing that staggers me.

I raise my hand, and trembling with an awful feeling, tear the end of the envelope.

A hand grips my arm.

Turning, I find myself face to face with Reuben.

There is a frown upon his honest face.

Undoubtedly he does not like what I have taken the liberty of doing.

"That is my letter, Mr. Lawson," he says.

"True, it was addressed to you, Reuben."

"And she said not to open it for three days."

"Well, man, you can keep your part of the agreement, and in three days open the letter. As for me, I have determined to see the inside of it now."

"By what right did you do this, Mr. Lawson?"

"I will tell you, Reuben. I have reason to believe that the writer of this note is one whom I have for two years believed dead—the young lady to whom I was betrothed."

He utters a cry.

"Under those circumstances, all the powers that be could not prevent me from reading what she has written here."

With that I take out the inclosure, determined to know the worst.

My eyes run to the end.

Her name is there—Heavens, what a shock it gives me.

I drop into a chair and groan; it seems to me that the heavens have fallen; strange lights flash before my eyes.

My darling—alive and here!

How basely have I been deceived; the whole thing flashes before my mind.

Has she been a party to the scheme?

I will not believe it; the whole blame rests on her father; how I hate him—because he was rich and I poor he made up his mind to separate us forever, and did so.

I groan again; then gnash my teeth.

Never until this moment has a suspicion ever entered my mind that there was any deception about my Marguerite's death.

I had read of it in a paper, talked with the family doctor who attended her, received her last message of love, and wept again and again over the mound that was said to mark her grave.

I am convinced that she was not a party to the fraud.

When I look up I find Reuben looking at me with a pitiful smile.

He sees how I suffer.

"What does she say, Mr. Lawson?"

Aroused by this, I realize that I have not glanced over the letter, and with an eagerness words cannot describe, I turn my attention toward what her hand had written.

It had been jotted down with a pencil, and yet I recognize her chirography.

To the stranger it might not appear different from any other lady's handwriting, but I can see little peculiarities in it that mark the individuality.

This is what I read aloud to Reuben:

FRIEND:—I thank you for your kindness. I am the only daughter of a wealthy banker of Chicago, John J. Sherlock. Some days ago I received a letter from Minnesota, stating that he was in the power of a gang of desperadoes, among whom were the James brothers, who held him for ransom.

Knowing my father's past, I was aware that he had made enemies of some of these men at the time of the close of the war, and I could readily comprehend they were seeking revenge.

In this letter he cautioned me to keep the secret, for should any force be sent out to rescue him, he would be put to death.

He also bade me gather what money I could, telling me to get checks cashed which he inclosed, and to come to his rescue alone.

That is why I am here—to save my father; that is why I risk my life, and have taken the disguise you have seen.

I may not come back—something terrible may happen to me. I am armed, and will kill myself, if need be. Should such a thing occur, I want the world, and particularly my friends, to know who is responsible.

Wait three more days, and then, if neither myself nor my father should turn up, publish these facts.

I can see no other way in which to save him, and only pray Heaven to be kind.

These outlaws have a cave near by, I understand from words in his letter. But I will soon know, as I am to meet one of them at Black Rock, in Barney Fay Ravine, between moonrise and morning. A thousand thanks for your kindness to a heart-broken girl. My father is all I have left to love—I will save him, or die with him.

MARGUERITE SHERLOCK.

That is all.

Calmly I fold the communication up, and place it in my pocket for future reference.

A tremendous change has come over my fortunes, and the world, which looked so dark before, now brightens under the influence of hope.

Her father played his cards well to deceive one as shrewd as myself.

I bear him no love, and would care little did he meet his fate here, at the hands of the desperate gang into whose power he has fallen.

But Marguerite, my darling, must be saved.

The thought of her going among a gang of desperadoes to save her father, who has blighted her life by his stern decree, makes me groan.

At the same time, I grit my teeth, and make a solemn mental oath that I shall save her.

Marguerite alive!

I feel as though the strength of seven men has been infused into my system.

If the chance is given to me, I will prove myself capable of performing prodigies of valor.

Surely a kind Providence must have sent her to the house of Reuben, to leave this letter in my very room.

Turning to the golden tresses on the table, I bury my face among them.

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Tears creep into my eyes, and I think them no stain on my honor as a man.

Probably she has believed me dead during these years, for the same diplomacy that so successfully deceived me could accomplish such a thing with her.

What hurts me worst of all is the fact that she now risks everything for the sake of the man I hate—whose hand blighted our lives.

Reuben has said little.

He understands the situation, however, and can in a measure sympathize with me.

I turn to him for information.

"Where is this Black Rock in the Barney Fay Ravine?"

A little information will suit me well.

Strange how all my fatigue has vanished.

A sprinter, about to run a race, would not feel more wide-awake than I am.

Every muscle and nerve seems to be on the *qui vive*, as though anxious to serve me in the interests of the lost one found.

It is enough to guide me.

I only hope I will arrive at the rock before she meets any one else.

Can it be possible that those of whom she speaks are leagued together in Minnesota, bent upon some desperate game?

Have I not looked upon Jesse James myself, not half an hour since, riding along the highway?

My determination is made, and I prepare to go out in search of my brave Marguerite.

Before starting, however, I have another mission that should be attended to.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HORSE IN THE THICKET.

The packet which Dr. Ben Bailey secured from the dead inmate of the tomb, and which has come into my possession in such a strange way, requires attention.

Although so anxious to start upon my own business, I cannot neglect that upon which I have been employed.

Some one will be anxious to see the document—of that I am positive.

Leaving Reuben, I pass out into the night, and quickly secure my horse from his shed, where she had left her steed for a while.

I am heartbroken at the delay, but business always claims my attention first, and I have staked my honor in this work.

Away we go.

The moonlight shows me the road, and I head for the town of Northfield.

Sultan, my good horse, never made better time, and yet it seems to me, in my impatience, that he lags in his pace, and I am continually urging the gallant fellow on.

Speedily I span the intervening distance that has separated me from Northfield.

It is close on one o'clock when I dash into the quiet town.

Every one is asleep, of course, at such an hour, but this suits me well, as I cannot bear to be an object of public curiosity, and the hot haste with which I pass

through the streets would certainly attract much attention, and give rise to speculation were the people awake.

I head direct for the hotel.

This, too, is shut up for the night.

Ranging up alongside the door, I lean over in my saddle, and using the butt of my revolver, I beat a tattoo upon the panel.

This speedily brings an answer.

A window is opened above.

From this protrudes a head, bearing a nightcap, and followed by a gun.

"What in the fiend's name do you mean making such an infernal racket?" growls a bass voice.

It is the landlord.

"Have you a guest here named Miss Marshall?"

"What's that to you?"

"Everything. I must see her."

"Not at this hour of the night."

"I will brook no delay. It is a matter of the gravest importance. She expects me."

"Nevertheless—"

"I am not a man to be trifled with. Open the door, or I will batter it down for you."

My impatience gets the better of my judgment, else would not speak in this way.

Fortunately, the landlord happens to be a man who can be impressed by such means.

He weakens at once.

"I wouldn't do that, stranger. Give me time, and I'll open the door to you. As to arousing the lady at this hour, I doubt the propriety of such a move."

"You need not, landlord. I am dressed, and have heard all that has passed. I will see the gentleman without delay."

That is Miss Marshall.

She has been seated at her window all the time.

I rejoice to know it, as such a lucky circumstance must save me many precious minutes, and time is indeed valuable to me just now.

Presently the landlord lets me in, muttering apologies for his bearish reception, for he is a good fellow at heart, though inclined to be a little cross at being aroused from his sleep.

The room is lighted by a lamp.

Hardly have we entered than a door opens, and a female figure glides in.

This is my employer, Miss Marshall.

She is a fine-looking woman of about thirty-five, in the prime of her beauty and face and figure.

I have no eyes for feminine charms now, my mind being wholly taken up with Marguerite, and the danger into which she has rushed.

Once I can conclude my business with Miss Marshall, I shall rush away to her rescue.

The lady has an eager look upon her face as she comes forward to greet me.

"Your presence here at this strange hour gives me hope, Mr. Lawson. No ordinary errand could bring you to me at such a time. Am I right—have you important news?"

"You shall judge for yourself, madam, when I have told you the story."

"Proceed, I beg. I am all impatience."

No one is near, the sturdy landlord having stepped out-

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side to look at the moon, or, more than likely, examine my horse to see if he cannot pick up some clew to my identity there.

So I can talk freely.

I do not mince words, remembering how exceedingly precious time is to me, but give her the main facts of the case.

She listens eagerly.

When I come to the point where the paper is discovered, I can hear her strained breathing.

A minute later I reach the point where my hand snatches the document.

She cries out then, unable to contain herself longer.

"You have it, Mr. Lawson—tell me?"

"Yes."

"Then let me see it, I beg of you."

"In the first place, madam, be prepared for disappointment. I have not examined the document, and it may not be the one you expect."

"If he was seeking it, I am sure. Do not keep me in such suspense, I beg of you," she pleads.

Unable to withstand it longer, I place the paper in her hands and watch her face.

That index will speedily tell me whether she is disappointed or not.

I am pleased to see it light up, as that indicates my work to be bearing fruit.

"Thank Heaven!" she breathes.

"You are pleased?" I venture.

"I am delighted, Mr. Lawson. This paper is worth a fortune to me."

"And to Dr. Bailey also, I presume."

"It would be to have it destroyed."

"You will excuse me, Miss Marshall, if I leave you in a hurry, but some very important business calls me away. I shall see you again."

Being a woman, she seems to feel a trifle hurt that her attractions have not proved more fascinating; but, under the circumstances, I have no time to spare in making explanations, even had it been my desire to do so.

Leaving my hotel, I mount my horse and gallop away.

My objective point is the ravine.

It lies some distance away, but at the rapid pace which I strike out with, I shall soon draw near the lonely spot.

Reuben has given me all the directions that are needed in order to find Black Rock, and the only thing I fear is that I may be too late.

In thus looking up the rendezvous of the gang of outlaws brought into the country by the James boys, I know full well the risks I run.

It is equivalent to taking my life in my hand, but were the danger ten times as great, I would not hesitate, for the love in my heart is strong enough to take me through fire and flood.

Marguerite must be saved—shall be saved, or else my own life sacrificed.

I am now near the ravine.

How dreary and lonely the place seems as seen in the pale moonlight.

It would be hard to imagine a more desolate situation, and if the outlaws have chosen it for a secret hiding-place, their wisdom is apparent.

The time has now arrived when I must abandon my good horse.

If I can only find Marguerite, it is my hope to make good use of Sultan. Hence, I must find a hiding-place for him that will be accessible, besides secure.

This I succeed in doing, with good luck, and feel reasonably secure in my belief that the horse will be there when I want him.

My next business is to find the place known as Black Rock.

It is a grawsome spot, well suited to all manner of dark deeds, and I feel a peculiar sinking of the heart when I realize that Marguerite has come here to meet some one of those outlaws, in order to free her father.

I have not much faith in their honor.

They may take the money she brings, and let the old banker go, while she is held a prisoner.

Why has she not attempted in some other way to accomplish the same thing?

It could be done, I believe.

Perhaps Marguerite has a reason for her actions beyond that which I see.

I come to a halt beside the rock, and eagerly look around to see if any traces can be discovered of the one I seek.

All remains silent and somber.

While I stand there I hear a sound that gives me new life.

It comes from the depths near by, and is the unmistakable whinny of a horse.

A suspicion of the truth dawns upon me, and I make my way in the direction from which the sound proceeds.

There is no mistake.

In five minutes I discover her horse, tied to a tree in the thicket.

The moon pierces the depths in places, and by its aid I succeed in locating the animal.

Somehow the sight of the horse affects me.

It is her steed.

Where is Marguerite?

Would to Heaven she were mounted on the animal just then.

I fondle the horse's head, because he has known her as a mistress—there is something in this thought pleasing to me.

The animal seems pleased because I notice him, and rubs his velvety muzzle against my cheek.

Animals accustomed to the presence of human beings get lonely as well as we do.

Stroking the horse's head, I am forming my immediate plans, when a muttered curse and a fall in the bushes near by warns me that some one is approaching the spot.

As it is not my desire to be seen, I glide into the shelter of the bushes and await the development of coming events.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

I believe I understand what brings this man into the thicket.

He comes not by chance, but to find the horse left there, and the presence of which he has probably learned from Marguerite herself.

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This tells me several things.

In the first place, she has arrived at the den of the outlaws.

Again, they do not mean to allow her to depart with her father, even after the ransom money has been paid over.

This is rank treachery, of course, but what care they for that?

The man advances again.

He seems to be very clumsy, or half drunk, for he stumbles again.

Then I sight him.

"Hang the horse; where did I leave the critter?" I hear him growl.

The animal betrays his presence just then by a low whinny, and the fellow expresses his satisfaction in eager words as he pushes forward to secure his prize.

Actually, I am tempted to knock the fellow down when he lays hands on her horse, but discretion causes me to change my mind before it is too late.

I watch him unfasten the bridle and lead the animal away.

He does not attempt to mount.

The branches are too dense to allow this, and, did he try it, he would probably be pulled out of the saddle.

I follow.

There is little difficulty in doing this, for he makes enough noise to deaden the little that marks my progress.

This is a rare chance, and I hasten to improve it, believing that in doing so I will bring up at the outlaws' secret hiding-place.

The man with the horse begins to descend the side of the glen.

It is steep, but there seems to be a path of some sort over the rocks, where a small stream trickles.

I manage to keep just far enough behind to avoid discovery, and yet not lose sight of the man who serves as my guide.

Success awaits me.

He pauses, and I can hear him open a door that is artfully concealed by vines.

I catch a flash of light.

Then I am alone—my guide has gone into the side of the ravine.

Losing no time, I creep forward to examine this wonderful affair.

The vines, as seen by the moonlight, look innocent enough, and no one would believe they cover the entrance to an outlaw den.

Can I enter?

The concealed door is hardly locked but I make an attempt before deciding.

It gives at my pressure, opening inwardly.

Gently I push it back, keeping a bright lookout, in order to discover danger ahead, if it is lurking there, awaiting me.

The interior is lighted up.

I gather at my first glance that this is a sort of stable where the horses of the outlaws are kept, and my wonder and admiration arise in equal ratio as I survey the scene and speculate upon the difficulties to be overcome in thus keeping a number of horses in a secret den.

No one is present, and I have an opportunity to study the situation.

Hitching-posts for nearly a score of horses line the walls of this artificially-made cavern, and quite a number have animals fastened to them, so that the place looks like a livery stable.

Although interested in the sight, I do not mean to spend much time here.

Human beings are near by.

I can hear voices.

What of Marguerite? She must have entered the cave.

My heart experiences a sinking spasm as I think of the dreadful danger menacing her, and involuntarily my hand seeks the revolver in my pocket.

I speedily find the door connecting the stable with an adjoining apartment, into which I look.

Really, this den of the outlaws is the most remarkable hiding-place I have ever seen.

It seems to be divided into different compartments, and forms quite a house.

I appreciate the difficulties that have been overcome in its construction, and give these desperate men credit for their work.

At the same time, I am more interested in other things than that of admiring the cave.

This second compartment is the general living-room, and a large number of bunks, placed steamboat-fashion on either side, show that it is also used as a sleeping-chamber.

A cookstove is at one end, and some boxes of provisions, showing that the men who make this den their hiding-place do not mean to starve.

I am amazed.

Such a group of desperadoes as I find before me! Had I discovered them in the wilds of Colorado, I would not have been surprised, but here in Minnesota it is significant. Some dare-devil scheme, which will shock the country, must be in the wind.

Perhaps they aim to rob the bank at Northfield, as large sums of money pass through it at stated times—a fact which is generally known.

The first man I see is Jesse James, and near him is his brother Frank.

There are besides a number of men with whom I am not acquainted.

Taken in all, it is the greatest assemblage of border outlaws I ever set eyes upon.

They are a determined lot, too, and can hold a regiment at bay.

One glance I sweep around.

Then I discover that Marguerite cannot be among them, for she is not in sight.

This does not surprise me.

I understand that there must be other compartments connected with this wonderful retreat, and possibly she has been placed in the same sub-cavern that holds her father.

Finding a chance to slip into the room, I do so, unnoticed, and from a heap of clothing in one corner I secure a wide felt hat, such as most of those present year.

This will help to conceal my identity, as the brim casts quite a shadow.

I manage to keep out of their way by crawling into one of the bunks.

The tobacco smoke in the room casts something of a cloud over everything, and gives me quite a little assistance.

I am glad that I have taken the precaution to disguise myself, for should the eye of Jesse James light on my face otherwise, he could not fail to recognize me.

My ears are on the alert.

Thus I am able to hear a great deal, and it is not long before I understand that my first suspicion is a true one. These men have come hither to clean out the Northfield bank, and the time has almost arrived for their work to begin. Minnesota will receive a rude shock ere many hours are flown, and awaken to find her institutions at the mercy of this desperate gang.

What I am most anxious about I hear nothing of for a long time.

Then a few words dropped by Jesse James near by tell me that the seeming boy has been placed in with the prisoner.

I do not know whether the truth respecting Marguerite's sex has been discovered or not, but am inclined to believe otherwise, for, in speaking of her, they say "he."

Possessed of a wild desire to see my darling, I can hardly restrain myself.

It is well I do.

Some movement is on deck, and shortly after I see a number of outlaws pass into the compartment used as a stable.

They are evidently about to enter upon some action looking toward profit.

Perhaps they may be in the direct line of communication with a gang of horse thieves, and as this business is carried on in Minnesota at the time of which I write, it would not be surprising that the supposition reaches the truth.

I wonder whether I can carry out my idea or not. Discovery is liable to come upon me at almost any moment, and, like a wise general, I prepare for the worst.

How many men are left?

This is a hard question to answer.

They move around, passing in and out from the stable.

At a rough guess I figure out that if I have to meet these men in a deadly duel, I will have six pitted against me.

Heavy odds, indeed, considering that any one of them is fully my equal in strength, and perhaps my superior in the use of a pistol.

I sincerely trust that the case can be engineered without such an encounter, which promises to result seriously for me; but, in case it must come, I will be found ready.

Observations give me a pointer.

I have before now discovered that there is an anteroom beyond the wall of logs, and, very probably, a means of exit still farther on.

I now discover another door.

This undoubtedly leads to the apartment where Marguerite and her father are confined.

Jesse James has not gone with the rest, as he complains of a headache.

When I see him draw one of the men over in the direc-

tion of the bunk where I lie, concealed by the blankets, I open my ears, hoping to hear news.

Nor do I make a mistake.

Something is on the tapis.

The man with the notorious outlaw seems to be an understudy. He looks much like Jesse James, and appears desirous of imitating him in all he does, which action seems to be encouraged by the other.

Possibly they have some motive in this.

It may be well for Jesse James to have a double in one part of the country while the original is doing desperate deeds hundreds of miles away.

An *alibi* is useful at times, especially in a hanging scrape.

Although they speak in low tones, almost every word uttered reaches me, and it may be set down as certain that I strain my hearing to the utmost in order to catch all.

"Wash, you obeyed my orders?"

"Yes, captain."

"The horse was where I told you?"

"The critter is in the stable yonder."

"Good!"

"What are you going to do with the boy?"

"Ah, Wash, even you don't catch on."

"To what?"

"The boy brought the money O. K.?"

"Yes. Will you let the old man go?"

"Certainly; but he will be back again."

"Hardly. He's tired of this place."

"He'll come back again, Wash."

"If you say so, I reckon you mean it; but why should he return?"

"Because I want him to—bringing more money to us. He has plenty, the old rascal."

"I don't understand, captain."

"Listen, then. You saw the boy?"

"Yes."

"Talked with him?"

"I certainly did."

"What did you think of him?"

"That he possessed a bold soul in that small body, to brave these dangers. One would never think he could be so brave. I liked him."

"What relation do you suppose he bears to the old banker?"

"H'm! Now you have me. His devotion indicates great regard. Is he a son?"

"No."

"Perhaps a grandchild?"

Jesse James laughs, places his hand on the arm of his companion, and, assuming a grave look, remarks, with considerable emphasis:

"Wrong again, Wash. This lad, with the yellow hair and the bright smile, is the banker's daughter!"

"Great Scott!"

CHAPTER VI.

DOWN THE ROPE.

Wash is surprised, and I do not wonder at it; but my heart is heavy, because the secret is such no longer.

"Does any one else know this, captain?"

"I don't know. It struck me that one or two of the boys looked suspicious. That was why I hurried her into the room with the banker."

"I begin to get on to your plan."

"What's to hinder us holding the girl for a ransom? We never said we'd let her go."

"A clever scheme, unless—"

"What?"

"The boys get on to her secret."

"I shall tell it when I feel like it, and the first man who dares insult that girl dies!"

Jesse James says this in a fierce voice, but I cannot remember ever having heard words that pleased me more.

Whatever I may have thought of the man before, I realize that, at least, he is not quite as black as they have delighted to paint him.

He has a wife—a mother.

Thank Heaven! however fierce a tiger he may be when engaged with men, he does not war upon women.

A load is lifted from my mind, and my heart seems lighter than ever.

Marguerite is safe with this man as her champion. He rules the roost, and his minions tremble before his eye.

They talk a little longer, but on other matters that have small interest for me.

I learn one thing.

The apartment in which my darling and her father are confined has an opening for air above, the rocks forming a natural chimney.

Can I find it?

This is now my greatest desire, but I have to watch my chance for leaving the den without attracting the attention I would avoid.

This is no small task.

My eyes are kept upon Jesse James and Wash, for if either of them see a man crawl out of the bunk near which their conversation has been held, they may suspect that it has been overheard. At any rate, special attention must be directed toward me, and this is what I am particularly anxious to avoid.

The chance comes.

It has seemed an eternity of waiting for me, and yet in minutes, no doubt, the time has not been so very long.

There are some occasions when the passage of time depends upon the feelings, and not on cold-blooded minutes and seconds.

I crawl out.

Passing carelessly across the floor, I enter the division used as a stable.

My heart is in my throat, so to speak, while thus moving.

Thank Heaven! no outcry announces discovery. Thus far I am safe.

Not for myself is this terrible strain of mental anxiety felt, but for the dear one whose fate seemingly rests in my hands.

I manage to glance back through the partly-open door, and see no signs of any excitement.

All seems well.

Thankful that such should be the case, I lose no time in making my way outside.

How pleasant the fresh air seems, coming from that

foul den, where the tobacco smoke is almost thick enough to cut with a knife!

I drink in huge draughts of the air, and seem to renew my life and strength.

One thing I have been wise enough to do.

In the stable some coils of rope have caught my eye, and I seized upon one.

Although not of a cumbersome size, it is certainly heavy enough to bear the weight of a man, no matter how heavy he might be.

I have a use for it.

If by good luck I find the opening or chute which supplies the prison with air, I will need some such means of descending.

Another thing I keep before my mind, and this is the lay of the land, how the rooms of this remarkable cavern are connected, and the relation they bear to each other.

Thus I will have a fair show of finding the opening I seek.

To climb the side of the ravine is a hard task, for it is exceedingly rugged and wild, but where there's a will there's a way, and in the end I conquer all these obstacles.

True, I am somewhat out of breath; my garments, torn in several places, where the thorns have made rents, and a dozen scratches on my hands, tell of encounters with sharp stones.

What of that?

I have conquered, and that means a step nearer my object—Marguerite.

Without wasting time to recover my breath, I begin to search.

The chute has an opening above, and I can in a measure locate it.

This simplifies matters.

After a hurried search that meets with no success, I discover that I must go about the matter in a systematic manner, if I hope to find what I am looking for.

When things are brought down to system, it is very likely that the result will be a gain.

I find it so.

Among the rocks I discover what seems to be an opening of some kind.

It has the appearance of a chimney.

The moonlight penetrates only a yard or two, and beneath that lies darkness, dense and almost palpable.

What is below I can only guess at.

I am disappointed in one thing—surely they must have a light of some kind in the room, and, if so, why do I not see it?

There is a temptation to abandon the claim and search for another, but a sort of subtle attraction holds me there.

Surely it is worth while to investigate.

If I am mistaken, I will soon discover the fact, and then it will be time enough to look further after the object I seek.

Thus deciding, I search about for some spur of solid rock where I can secure the end of the rope carried from the stable.

Luck favors me.

I manage to secure the rope in such a fashion that there is utterly no danger of its slipping. I am particular about this, because a fall might mean death.

All is now ready.

The loose end of the rope I mean to lower into the opening, but, first of all, for the purpose of learning when the bottom is reached, I fasten a five-pound stone to the line.

Leaning over, I lower away—not swiftly and carelessly, but with due caution.

As the rope continues to slip through my fingers, I begin to believe there will not be enough of it, and hence experience a sinking sensation of the heart.

Then the strain suddenly grows less.

The stone has found a lodging-place.

I lower the balance of the rope, and find only some five or six feet to spare.

This is good fortune, indeed.

The next job is to descend.

I confess to a slight uneasiness on this score, for it is no easy task to climb thirty feet or more of rope, when not secured below.

Nevertheless, the thing is awaiting me, and must be accomplished.

I take hold.

One thing sure—there will be no trouble about going down the rope.

It is always so in life—easy to slide down, and difficult to get up again.

Before I have gone ten feet I find that there are projections which can be utilized in ascending, if the chute is once gained.

These suddenly cease.

I swing clear into space, and begin to turn around, as the rope untwists.

It is evident that I am now in a natural chamber of some sort, though the darkness prevents me from seeing whether it is the one I aim to reach, and where I expect to find the prisoners.

Whatever doubts I have are soon dispelled, for I can hear a murmur of voices, coming from the apartment where the outlaws are gathered.

This ought to settle it.

As I swing around in descending, my eyes catch sight of a line of light, such as would appear under or over a door.

Then my feet touch solid rock.

I am down.

It would be hard to analyze the feelings that come upon me.

Am I so close to the woman I have loved, and who has for two years been dead to me?

I seem to feel her presence.

It intoxicates me.

The future breathes of new hopes; the old love has always lain dormant in my heart, like a smoldering fire, and now this has kindled into a burning flame once more.

Enough!

The time may come when I can reflect upon these things, but just now action is necessary.

It is utterly useless endeavoring to see anything in such darkness.

I depend more upon my sense of hearing to tell me whether any one is near.

Crouching there, I listen.

All is silent, save the murmur of voices in the adjoining apartment.

I am tempted to call out and speak a name that must bring a response.

Just at this moment, however, some one speaks.

"What can it mean, father?"

It is Marguerite. She is even now not ten feet away from me.

How her low voice thrills me.

I long to clasp her in my arms; the impulse within me is to rush forward, but I restrain it.

Such action would be folly; nay, it might even be suicidal, since a shriek from Marguerite must bring the outlaws on the scene.

I am wise enough to understand this, even at such a moment.

So I bid my heart be still, and listen to hear what is said.

"I do not know, child. My first impression was that something, either an animal or a human being, was descending the chute above, for it was surely chips of stone we heard fall."

"Have you changed your mind, father?"

"I hardly know. Why should any one seek to enter our prison in that manner?"

"All is silent now."

"Yes. Whatever it is, I believe it has reached the ground, and is near us."

"Father, you frighten me."

"Keep just behind me, child. I have this billet of wood, and will defend you while life lasts."

"Look! I can see a pair of eyes glowering upon us from the darkness. There! they are gone now; but they will come again."

"Are you sure, child?"

"Yes; some dreadful creature is near us. I seem to feel its presence," she whispers.

At this I almost groan.

It seems hard to have such things said; but I remember the circumstances.

Of course it is my eyes she has seen, and they vanished simply because I closed them.

I hear the banker groan.

"This is terrible; I hardly know what to do."

"Shall I scream?" she asks.

"No, no."

"It would bring help."

"Yes, and be likely to precipitate this trouble upon us. We must think of some other way. There, I can see the eyes now."

"What do you think it can be?"

"Perhaps a panther."

"Oh, Heavens!"

"Be brave, child."

"I am not trembling, father. See, here is a small revolver I had hidden away. Take it, and make good use of it."

It is high time now I speak.

"John Sherlock, hold your fire!"

"Great Cæsar! it is a man. Who are you?"

"A friend!" I reply, quietly.

CHAPTER VII.

MARGUERITE.

Now that the game is on, I have perfect control of my nerves.

This is a peculiarity with me. When the time for action arrives, I generally manage to prove cool and collected, and it has proven of immense value to me many a time.

"A friend! Do you hear that, Marguerite? This man who comes to us so strangely calls himself a friend. Hope is not all gone when friends spring up in this style."

Then he addresses himself to me. How well I remember his grandiloquent style. John J. Sherlock should have been an actor. He cannot speak, even on the most commonplace subjects, without a tragic air that might do justice to a Forrest or a Booth.

"Good sir, I beg that you will tell us who you are, and whence you came. We are in distress. We call upon our good genii for help, and, behold! you appear like magic. I shall never pretend to disbelieve the Arabian Nights' tales again."

His long-winded talk does one good thing. It enables me to plan a little.

"Mr. Sherlock, I have come here at the risk of my life to save your daughter and yourself. There is no time to ask and answer questions. What I want to know is this: Are you quite willing to trust everything to me?"

"Well, as there is not the slightest chance of our doing anything alone, I presume we will have to put full trust in you, though my business education has always warned me not to place too much faith in unknown people."

"Leave it to your daughter, sir; women have keener perceptions in this respect than men. If she says 'nay,' I shall return the same way I came, and trouble you no more."

"Marguerite, do you hear what he proposes?"

"Yes."

"And your verdict, girl?"

"Trust him, father. His words and voice seem to tell me he is indeed our friend. If he has indeed risked his life to come here and save us, we would be foolish to refuse his help."

Bravely said.

My Marguerite's heart spoke then, although perhaps she knew it not herself.

"Advance, unknown friend, and join us," says the banker prisoner.

I obey.

Although I am sure the man's hand is held out toward me, I make no move toward taking it, for that hand is the last one I ever want to touch.

For her sake I will save him, but otherwise he could go to the deuce, for all I care.

When a man tries to ruin my life, as this man has, with his plots, and tears all there is in the world dear to me away, I am human enough to hate him, and although I would not go out of my way to hurt him, neither would I take a step aside to help him.

Accidentally, I touch Marguerite, and she does not shrink from me.

Perhaps some inward monitor gives her a suspicion of the truth. We sometimes understand things through in-

tuition, while it has not dawned upon our intellect to grasp the truth, which comes later.

At any rate, I am near Marguerite now, and the thought gives me joy.

"Pardon me, but the way in which I have come here is rather peculiar. In truth, it was through the roof."

"Ah! yes; the chute. I thought it was an opening, and longed for wings to reach it, but alas! such wishes were in vain. And to think you should have come that way; it is peculiar."

I pay little attention to his babblings; he is an object of such small concern in my eyes.

"What worries me is the question of how I am to get you out of here. It is a peculiar thing to ask a lady to be drawn up through that opening."

"Is there any other way?" she asks.

"None whatever."

"Then you shall see that I am ready to take my chances with my father. I have had my eyes opened to the foolishness I showed in coming here, instead of sending some one else, and I am ready and willing to undo the mischief by any means in my power."

"Bravely spoken," I am forced to say.

I know she blushes, though her face is invisible just now.

"Consider it settled, friend, that we are willing to take any risks in order to escape from the clutches of these devils; and, I presume, the sooner we start operations the better."

"There is no especial need of hurry. Several hours of darkness remain, and none of them will probably enter here again."

"I don't know about that; it's uncertain," returns the banker.

That is one of the chances we must take.

"Have you been in the dark all the while?"

"Yes."

"Then you have no light?"

"There is a candle here. I was lying in the darkness when they put Marguerite in, and, as she revealed her identity at once, there has been no need of illuminating."

"Still, if you did, they would not notice it?"

"Not at all. I've been in the habit of reading my Shakespeare at all hours, and as day is the same as night in here, it has been nothing for me to use the candle."

"Then light it, please."

"With pleasure."

A match is scratched.

Then comes a small, blue flame, that travels around until it meets the wick of the candle, to which it is communicated.

A better light springs up now.

Turning, I see Marguerite.

It is hard for me to keep from disclosing my identity to her, but the time is not yet ripe for such action, and I refrain.

She leans forward eagerly, as though some little suspicion has aroused hope within her gentle breast.

I can see the light in her eyes as she scans my face.

How sadly it dies out.

A look of keen disappointment takes its place that cuts me to the heart.

'At the same time I experience a wild thrill of almost savage joy.

She loves me still.

Our separation has not been rendered complete through her consent.

There will be a scene of happiness when I disclose my identity.

I would do so now, to encourage Marguerite, but for the old banker.

As soon as the chance comes to tell her in private, I may be tempted to take advantage of such an opportunity.

Until then I can wait.

When he has lighted the candle, the banker, in turn, glances over me.

In his own cool way, almost insulting, he looks at me from head to foot.

Inwardly I rave.

So far as outward appearances are concerned, I am quite cool and collected.

"Never met you before, sir," he remarks.

"That doesn't have anything to do with the case, sir. I desire to help you, if you are willing, to save yourself and daughter from the fate that threatens."

"We ought to be willing," he remarks, "seeing that it is Hobson's choice with us."

"Here is the rope by means of which I came down the shaft. If you will examine the way as best you can by such a poor light, you may have some idea of the route you are to take, and can give me an opinion as to whether it is practicable for her."

"It puzzles me to understand one thing, sir."

"What is that?"

"For myself it is all very well, but how is Marguerite to hold on to the rope."

"I have thought of that. There is plenty of the rope to make a loop in which she can sit."

"Good! I see you are up in these things. By the way, can you draw her up alone?"

I raise my arms.

"I believe I possess both qualifications that are calculated to bring success—the strength and the willingness. If your daughter is willing to trust herself to me, I am positive I can land her safely out of this den."

Again she looks strangely at me.

Poor girl! What memories are struggling for recognition, like prisoner birds beating their wings against the bars of their cage.

I feel so sorry for her that I shall not be able to keep my secret much longer.

The banker looks at his child.

"What say you, daughter? Are you willing to place your life in his charge?"

"I can trust him."

The other mutters something I do not catch, but I suspect that he feels something of an aversion toward me, just as Marguerite is drawn to me by the subtle power hidden from view.

He picks up the candle.

It is his intention to do as I have hinted, and examine the shaft.

This will take him away from us for a minute or so.

It is all I ask.

One word from me will tell her all.

How will she receive it?

I trust calmly.

The banker moves away, candle in hand, and I count his steps until he reaches the spot under the shaft.

Why does he move so slowly? or is it only imagination on my part that makes it appear so?

Marguerite stands near me.

She, too, watches his progress, but with a different thought in her mind.

All she is anxious about is that his report upon the project shall be satisfactory, for disappointment would be keen.

Now he has reached the spot.

I smile at the dramatic attitude of the banker as, shading his eyes with one hand, he looks upward and endeavors to pierce the obscurity that marks the interior of the shaft.

Now is my time.

How my heart beats like a trip-hammer!

I can hardly control it.

What will she say?

Does she believe me dead?

I hope she will not be too greatly surprised and shriek aloud.

If we were in a place of safety I would not care, but here, with perils surrounding us, it may be the means of new troubles.

Should I be unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the outlaws, then the game is lost.

Still, I must risk it.

No longer can I refrain from disclosing my identity to her.

Having thus made up my mind, I turn from the contemplation of the old man.

At the same time she looks toward me, and our eyes meet.

I take a step forward, which brings me within a foot or two of her. Her eyes dilate, as though my action has alarmed her, but the look on my face can only speak of yearning love.

"Marguerite, is it possible you do not know me?" I ask, in low, thrilling tones.

The shock is cruel.

What I have most feared follows, for, in her great surprise, a wild cry bubbles from her lips.

We are lost.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEARLY LOST.

This cry which bursts involuntarily from Marguerite's lips threatens to prove very disastrous to us.

It must surely be heard by those in the adjoining cave, unless, by rare good luck, some bacchanalian song drowns it.

There will be a rush for the door. I must be discovered, and, although ready to show fight, the end will be the same.

Too late I realize how foolish I have been to disclose my identity to the poor girl, as though she could be expected to receive such a shock without giving vent to her feelings.

If anything is to be done, it must be brought about quickly.

The banker hurries toward us.

His face is one interrogation point.

At the same moment I hear a key rattling in the lock of the door.

Should any one enter, all is lost.

I snatch out a revolver.

It will cost Jesse James his life to cross that threshold just now, and yet he is the best friend Marguerite has among them.

To kill him might be a terrible misfortune to her.

These things flash through my mind with the rapidity of lightning.

The banker possesses more shrewdness than I have ever given him credit for.

He grasps the situation as far as he sees it.

Just before the door is opened, he deliberately blows out the candle.

This leaves us in the dark.

Unless the person entering brings a light with him, he will not be able to see anything.

Mentally I congratulate the banker on the superior acumen he has displayed. It is really a master-stroke of policy, and may yet save the day.

It makes me feel more like making an effort to save him, also—something that I have had very little inclination to do thus far.

The door opens.

The darkness confuses him.

"Mr. Sherlock!"

Ah! as I suspected, it is Jesse James himself who has come.

The banker answers:

"Here!"

He has been wise enough to bring darkness upon the scene. Will he be equal to the emergency now?

"What's the matter in here?"

"Matter?"

"I heard a scream."

"Yes; my child struck her head, or something of the kind."

"Is it serious?"

"No, no," remarks Marguerite, hastily.

"Nevertheless, I had better bring a light in and see to it," returns the outlaw.

"I beg that you will not."

"It may be more serious than you think. Besides, I shall find it no trouble."

So he moves through the door.

They cannot restrain him.

To appear more anxious than is necessary would probably only serve to arouse his suspicions, provided they are not already brought out by what has occurred.

I am not idle.

Groping around, I endeavor to find the rope.

That is what will betray us when the light is brought upon the scene.

If I can only seize upon it, I believe it can be arranged to deceive him.

A second at such a time means much, and a man may live an eternity during what at another time would prove a very small period.

I begin to despair.

As a last resort I fear very much that I will have to fall back on my revolver, and bring about a battle on a small scale.

At about the last moment success attends my efforts, and the rope falls into my hands.

It is time.

Already the light is coming.

A plunge back, drawing the rope taut, so that it will seem more like a crack than anything else, if noticed at all.

There is a hiding-place, too, for me, behind a barrel that chances to lie in the corner.

Here I crouch.

Again Jesse James enters.

This time he carries a lantern in his hand, and endeavors to look all around him.

It is a very unsatisfactory job, for the light dazes his eyes.

The banker is apparently caressing his child, and rubbing her forehead, as though it is here Marguerite has struck herself.

"It is all right, Jesse James. She is more frightened than hurt, I reckon."

Bravo, John Sherlock! I give you credit for being a good actor, since you manage to deceive this man.

The more credit is due because the banker himself does not know what the cause of Marguerite's emotion may be.

All is done so naturally that even a more suspicious man might have had the wool pulled over his eyes.

I only pray he may not look too keenly in my direction now.

If he does, and makes a discovery, Jesse James will probably be the worst surprised man in seven counties, for I have him under my eye, and when I fire I generally bring down game.

Nevertheless, I am a little nervous over the matter, because I do not want more trouble than I can help, and besides, such an affair will lessen her chances of escape, and that is the subject nearest my heart.

Marguerite plays her part well, too, considering what a tremendous shock she has just received hearing me call her name.

I am proud of her.

She looks up and smiles in Jesse James' face.

"It is nothing much; I am quite safe," she says, earnestly.

Perhaps it is just as well that the magic charm of her eyes holds him a prisoner, for if he glances around, he is sure to see the rope, as it will swing back and forth with a pendulum-like movement in spite of me.

I can see him look around, but his glance is directed backward.

Several men stand in the doorway; they are too far away to discover the rope, and I have no fear of them.

Jesse James speaks in a low voice; being near him, I can catch his words, which these men are unable to do.

"I know your secret," he says, abruptly.

Marguerite utters a cry of dismay.

"Don't be afraid, girl, it's safe with me. I don't war on women. If your father will bring the money demanded, I'll see that you go free. Meanwhile, look to me for protection."

"You are kind, sir."

"Not at all, only I'm no savage. I saw too much during the war to ever hurt a woman. Men are my game. I don't have any mercy on a man who crosses my path."

This might be meant for me; it is spoken so vindictively.

I half expect the man to turn and call on his followers to leap upon me.

But such a thing does not happen.

All the while I am most anxious to have him leave the place.

My heart seems to stand still with suspense, for there is always a question as to whether I will be discovered or not.

Thank Heaven, he turns, after a few more remarks to Marguerite, telling the old man to be prepared to move in the morning.

Gone!

There has been no discovery.

Thank Heaven for that.

I wait until all is quiet again before venturing to leave my hiding-place, and then make my way to where I have just seen the prisoner banker and his daughter.

The latter has the candle and would light it, but I beg him to refrain, for the time at least, for we have no use for it.

What little remains to be said can just as well be spoken in the darkness.

Are they ready for escape?

John Sherlock is a peculiar man, and I am half-afraid that he will venture some sort of opposition at the last moment.

He appears half-way rational, and that gives me hope. It is arranged at last.

I am to go up the rope first, and if I succeed in reaching the outside world, my first effort shall be to draw up Marguerite.

She is not heavy, and I am as certain as I live that I can get her up.

When this has been accomplished, the next thing on the programme will be the rescue of the old banker himself.

I am not so certain on this score.

John Sherlock is not a portly man, but I imagine he lacks agility to climb a rope for such a distance, and I have no idea of endeavoring to draw him up.

That is none of my business, however.

When the plan of campaign is decided upon, I lose no time in setting to work.

In the darkness, I manage to find Marguerite's hand and press it.

To whisper in her ear I would have given much, but it is too dangerous with that ogre around.

He is vindictive enough to betray me if he learns my secret.

I have reason to know him of old, and I believe there is nothing too mean for him to do, once his ire is aroused.

Under these circumstances I restrain my impatience and wait.

The time will soon come when I may have my own again, whom fate has cheated me of this long two years back.

As I arrange a slip-noose in the end of the rope, I give them a few last directions.

It can be set down as certain that I am exceedingly careful about my work, when a poorly-constructed knot would perhaps be the means of murdering the one being I love.

All is ready.

Having temporarily fastened the rope below so as to make it taut, I begin to climb.

Just here is where my athletic training comes into good play.

I am able to go up that rope with the skill of an acrobat used to performing on the trapeze.

Presently I reach the chute above.

From this on it will be easier, as I can have some support for my feet.

Laboriously I climb upward.

Will this chute never end?

I am panting now with my exertions, and from lack of breath feel compelled to rest when I come across another projecting knob of stone.

While thus recovering my breath, I discover that the top of the well is just above my head.

This gives me joy.

One more good tussle, and I crawl out of the opening, thankful to be once more upon the surface of the earth instead of deep down in its bowels.

Before making any attempt at the succor of my companions below, I manage to recover in a fair degree from my fatigue.

Then I examine the matter.

The rope can be passed over the limb of a tree growing over the rocky chute, which will relieve me of much strain.

I proceed to accomplish this feat.

Then I am ready to begin the task of hauling Marguerite out of the depths.

A signal has been arranged.

Thus I let those below know that I am ready by a shake of the rope, thrice repeated, and an answering signal assures me that they are on the *qui vive*, waiting for me to begin.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DISCOVERY.

The task begins.

I find it harder than I had anticipated, but, determined to succeed, I strain every muscle and nerve.

It is fortunate that I am a man possessing considerable strength, or the task would be beyond my powers of endurance.

As it is, I find myself perspiring freely in spite of the cool atmosphere around me.

By degrees the rope above ground lengthens.

I secure a good hold and pull a yard. Then comes the most difficult part of all—gaining a new grip without letting go.

By one means or another I manage to accomplish my task.

Not for worlds would I let the rope slip.

That would kill me, because I feel that all I have worth living for is suspended in the chute, and a slip on my part must send her to death.

Never in all my life have I been so constrained to outdo myself.

The end comes.

An awful suspicion has entered my head.

Can it be possible that the banker has taken it into his head to be the first one to ascend?

It would be just like him.

If I should discover this to be the case I would be thoroughly tempted to let the rope slip and allow him the pleasure of a descent.

Such an act might imperil Marguerite's life, as it was possible for her to be below and in the way of any descending body.

With more anxiety than I could express in words, I await the moment when I may discover the whole truth.

It comes.

Marguerite is on the rope, secured by the slip-noose which I formed.

Thank Heaven for that!

The next task for me is to get her out of the narrow opening.

I secure the rope to the tree before attempting anything else.

Then, bending over the opening, I take hold of the one I love so dearly.

Her arms are around my neck.

Thus I take her out of the chute.

My heart thrills with satisfaction to think she has been saved through my means.

Warmly I press her to my heart, and kiss her dear face.

It is sweet to know that the one being you have loved, and who has long been lost to you, is, after all, alive.

"Henry, they told me you were dead," she sobs in my arms.

"The same cruel deception was put upon me, darling. I have wept over your grave again and again, never dreaming that you lived until I found the note you left in my room to-night."

"Your room. Oh, Henry, can it be possible?"

"Yes; a strange fate led you into my room. It was with my scissors you cut off the golden curls I loved so well. Indeed, it was the sight of them that first aroused a suspicion in my heart, and made me eager to read the note you had left behind."

"I am so happy to know that you live—that it is to you I owe my life," she murmurs, from the shelter of my arms.

"And it seems to me as though a new Paradise had opened to me. Life has been worth little since I believed you had left me, darling."

"But this is all so strange."

"Not when you understand it."

"Who could have done such a wicked thing?"

Plainly, she does not suspect.

I am bound to tell her, and yet it is hard to give one so gentle to understand that the parent whom she has loved all these years could be so cruel and heartless as to wreck her life in order to gratify this whim.

"Your father is the guilty one, Marguerite."

She shivers.

Perhaps something like the truth has come to her before, but if so she has put it out of her heart, for she loves this cruel parent.

Indeed, it was this great regard for her father that first attracted me to her, for I argued that a girl who could esteem her parent so highly would make a good wife.

She seems shocked.

Although I feel sorry for her, I do not regret that the knowledge has come home to her at this opportune moment, for something tells me the time is near at hand when Marguerite must choose between us.

Shall it be her father or me whom she will give up? It is a terrible question to decide.

"But—you will not desert him, Henry. I beg you to save him."

My hour has come.

Revenge is sweet.

Gently I unclasp those dear arms from my neck, and, still holding them, I look into her face as seen in the dim moonlight.

"Marguerite, that man has injured me more than all other men on earth. I hate him, because he separated me from all I had in the world to love—because he made us believe one another dead."

"Oh, Henry!"

"But he is your father; you love him, and that is enough for me. Because of that, I will spare him—yes, and do my best to save him."

Those wondrous loving arms find their way about my neck again, and I do not resist.

"Henry, bless you for those words. They come straight from your heart."

"Confound you! why don't you pull?"

These words come welling up the shaft, and announce that the banker is growing impatient.

I have forgotten all about him in the great happiness of clasping my long-lost darling to my heart, and realizing that once more she belongs to me alone.

He has, doubtless, signaled with the rope until his stock of patience, never very large, has been entirely exhausted, and then, with a vague fear struggling at his heart that he has been deserted, he calls aloud.

This is dangerous work.

More, even; it is suicidal policy.

Very possibly other ears than ours may have heard what he called out.

If so, there will be the deuce to pay.

I bend down and take hold of the rope, giving it a shake, to let him know I am on deck.

A tremendous task is before me.

The banker must be pulled up until he can assist himself in the chute.

I brace myself for the effort as he gives the final signal that he is ready.

Never was a man given a more unpleasant task. Had he been a stranger, I could have risked my life for him with pleasure, but that man, the object of my aversion—well, it gives me the creeps to do it.

Still, my mind is made up, and I have promised Marguerite.

That is enough.

I will do my best to get the Chicago banker out of the clutches of his foes, and then trust to his sense of fairness for the result.

At any rate, Marguerite is mine; I swear I will not give her up again.

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

So I bend down and get a good clutch on the rope, for the strain will be great.

The banker is quite a heavy man.

If you have never attempted to raise one hundred and fifty pounds dead weight, you want to try it.

The result will astonish you.

It seems like a young house coming up, and threatens to break one's back.

I have set my legs apart in a way to resist the strain to the best advantage, and then I begin operations.

He starts.

Good Heavens! can I ever raise him, unaided, from the floor to the roof of the cave?

I am a fool to try.

Why does he not try to help himself?

He could climb up the rope part way at least, and relieve me of the strain.

I manage to get a second grip.

Again a pull brings him two feet nearer the surface. This is a good start.

Can I keep it up?

At this moment something occurs that breaks me all up. I hear loud shouts below.

A flash of light comes from the chute, and distinctly I hear the report of a revolver.

Above the clamor I hear the strident voice of the banker.

"Keep off, you devils! Back, I say, or your fate be on your own heads. Take that, you villain, and may it serve you well. Hi! there, above! pull, man; pull like fury!"

I endeavor to do so.

It seems too late.

A thousand pounds have apparently been added to that on the lower end of the rope, and I could no more move it than fly.

Worse still, I find that I must let go my hold on the rope or else be dragged into the hole.

As this means sudden death, and, having no desire for such a fate, I release my clutch.

I know what it means.

Some of the men have rushed forward and seized upon the dangling legs of the man who is suspended in mid-air.

He may kick and struggle as he pleases, but it will avail him nothing.

Once they lay hands upon him he is doomed to remain right there.

So I drop the rope, which goes rattling along down the chute.

"You have let him fall!" gasps Marguerite, horror-stricken at what has happened.

"He was only a few feet from the bottom."

"But why did you break your promise?" she asks, evidently not understanding.

"I only said I would do my best to save him, and that I have already done. When I let go of the rope the enemy had hold of the other end. I did not care to be dragged down—for him."

"Forgive me, Henry."

"Never mind it, now. We must fly."

"And leave him?"

"He will be safe. They have sworn to set him free when a certain sum was paid into their hands. This you have done."

"Yes, yes."

"Then they will let him go very shortly, depend on it. We must consider our own situation. Danger confronts us. Come."

Still she hesitates.

"Are you afraid to trust me, Marguerite?"

"No, no, but—why are you here, Henry?"

"To save you."

"You have nothing to do with these men; the capture of my father is no part of a scheme for revenge upon him?"

My eyes are open now, and I grasp the situation; it is only natural for her to suspect something of this sort. Men will do all manner of strange things, associating themselves with characters far beneath them on the social scale, with the idea of revenge.

Thank Heaven! I have not been tempted to do this.

I can look into her clear eyes squarely, and not feel ashamed.

"They are foes; I am a detective, you remember. My only dealing with them will be to arrest them on occasion."

"Henry, I will go."

It is really time.

A couple of minutes mean much to us, and about that time has been consumed since the men below made their first rush upon the banker.

They certainly must comprehend that the latter has friends outside, and, missing the seeming boy, will understand that he has already been drawn up through the chute.

One result must follow.

They will leave the cave and make their way to the top of the rise as speedily as possible, and, if they reach there before we leave, it is extremely probable hot work will follow.

This I am naturally anxious to avoid, since my companion must share the danger, and a flying bullet might bereave me in my hour of joy.

CHAPTER X.

AT BAY IN THE OLD MILL.

If I can only reach Sultan now, I believe all will be well.

It does not occur to me that the outlaws have horses just as fleet as my own, and that they will be apt to pursue me.

Leading Marguerite by the hand, I set to work to get away from the spot.

The rocks and roots of trees would afford good hiding-places for rabbits, but they prove troublesome to us when we endeavor to pass over them.

A number of times we trip, but on such occasions the second proves of assistance to one who stumbles.

My judgment fortunately does not err.

We head in the right direction.

Certain sounds give me to understand that the outlaws have reached the rocks where the opening of the chimney, or chute, is located.

Not finding us there, what course will they take?

This is a matter of some importance to me, although I have no time to stop and consider it.

Marguerite holds out bravely.

Presently, it seems to me the surroundings have grown more familiar.

True, the moonlight is very deceptive, but, although I might find the place where Sultan has been left much easier if the light were stronger, at the same time the outlaws would be able to get sight of me the sooner.

Hence, I cannot complain, since it seems all for the best.

Eagerly I look about me.

What would I not give to discover my horse!

It seems as though all my thoughts are concentrated toward that one idea.

The strain on my mind is intense.

At last comes relief.

I have discovered certain marks that tell me just where I am.

Unless I make a grievous mistake, the spot where Sultan has been left is just over yonder to the left. I will reach it in a minute.

Another fear seizes upon me.

What if the noble horse had been found and appropriated in my absence?

This would leave me afoot in these wilds, with fierce desperadoes searching for me in every direction.

I do not like the prospect.

The clump of trees now stands before me, and in ten seconds I will know the worst.

My heart almost stands still.

Entering the spot, I fail to see Sultan, and a wave of disappointment sweeps over me.

Then a movement is heard.

There stands the horse.

He has taken advantage of the opportunity, and lain down during my absence.

My feelings undergo a change.

In place of despair, I experience exultation.

The presence of Sultan, when just as likely as not he might have been stolen, I take as an omen of good fortune.

All may yet be well with us. It is a matter of supreme indifference to me what becomes of the Hon. John J. Sherlock, and I only trust most sincerely that he will not run across my path again.

Sultan is glad to see me.

He gives a whinny of delight, which is really ill-advised, if one can speak in this strain of a horse.

Marguerite is quickly seated on his back, and, bridle in one hand, revolver in the other, I set myself to the task of reaching the road.

Should any one of the outlaws endeavor to stop me, he will do so at his peril, as I am in no frame of mind to be trifled with.

My hope is that when the country road is reached we can make good time and gain some friendly house, or even distant Northfield.

True, the outlaws have horses.

They may use them.

I do not forget that the secret of their cave is in danger, and they will go to some trouble in order to preserve this.

We are not disturbed where I have expected the most trouble, and this gives me hope.

All may yet be well.

The road at last, thank Heaven!

There is now no reason why I should not also mount, and start Sultan up.

This I do.

Marguerite rides behind, clasping me around the waist. She trusts me with all her heart, and knows I am determined to save her if possible.

I urge Sultan into a gentle canter.

As long as I do not hear signs of pursuit I am averse to starting him into a trot and giving Marguerite a severe jolting.

I hear shouts behind.

Have some of the outlaws sighted us?

It is very probable, for just here the road must be in plain sight from the rise.

If they have seen us I am sure pursuit will not long be delayed.

Perhaps I do wrong to proceed at such a gentle pace now, since we must pay up for it later on.

Sultan must go faster.

I am just about to urge him on when a figure springs out into the road.

"Halt, thar!"

Of course, this is one of the outlaw gang, sent on the first alarm to guard the road.

I can see a weapon in his hand.

He levels it as if to enforce his order.

Too late!

I have already covered him by instinct, and as I pull the trigger the man falls back.

My road is unobstructed now.

"On, Sultan!"

As I speak, the noble horse, hardly flinching when the revolver is discharged so close to his ear, plunges forward.

We are off!

A double burden Sultan has to carry.

Will he be equal to it?

If the pursuit should be hot I am afraid this will tell upon him.

A superb riding horse is slenderly built, and any additional burden on his back soon makes itself felt.

Away we go.

The road in places is soft, and when passing over one of these tracts I listen to hear if there are any signs of pursuit behind.

To my dismay, I hear it at once.

Yes, there comes the sweep of horses madly dashing along the road.

Evidently, the outlaws have not let grass grow under their feet.

My own steed is now doing nobly.

Were I mounted on him myself I would not have the least fear of being overtaken, but it is the double burden that tells.

I can make out the fact that we are being surely overhauled by our pursuers.

"Have you forgotten how to handle a horse?" I ask Marguerite, over my shoulder, as we go plunging along the road.

"No, no; I always was a good horsewoman, you know," she breathes in my ear.

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

"Then you can ride Sultan into town ahead of those desperadoes. They cannot catch you."

"What do you mean to do?" she asks, quickly, as though taking the alarm.

"To save you," I reply.

"By sacrificing yourself," she says, quickly.

"That does not follow necessarily. I will relieve the horse so that he can carry you to safety. As for myself, I will be able to hide somewhere near by."

"You mean to attack them—to keep them from following me."

She had guessed my intention.

My confusion betrays the fact.

"You shall not leave me, Henry; I forbid it."

"But—"

"I refuse to go on. If you dismount, I will return to your side and share your fate."

I groan.

Brave Marguerite! how her devotion thrills me, and yet I would that I might have my way in the matter.

As she is resolute, I must give in.

Can we escape together?

Her hands clasp me tightly, and I can only experience a thrill of happiness to think that I have found my own after these years of doubt and darkness.

The throb of horses' hoofs in the rear grows more and more distinct, as I realize when I come to pay strict attention to it.

How long will it take them, at this rate, to overtake us?

They seem to be coming up very fast.

Perhaps we may find shelter somewhere.

A house might hold us and keep our enemies at bay until help arrives.

As yet no such harbor has offered itself.

Rapidly the outlaws thunder after us.

Sultan strains every muscle, like the noble beast that he is, but the flesh is not as strong as the spirit is willing. He fails to make a strike.

In spite of his strenuous exertions, those charging in our rear creep up, rapidly diminishing the intervening space.

Unless something occurs, this cannot long be kept up.

Those behind will overtake us, and then comes the tug of war.

I am not entirely willing that this should take place, if by any means it can be avoided; but as yet I cannot see the way out of the dilemma.

Ah! a house at last.

It seems to be an old rookery, and I am at a loss to account for its character, when my eyes fall upon a water-wheel.

It is a mill, or has been in times past, but, from appearance, I should judge it must have been deserted for some time.

Shall we stop here?

It offers certain advantages which may aid us in our battle.

Whatever is to be accomplished, it must be done quickly.

I draw Sultan in.

"We will hide here. Perhaps we may elude them yet. Sultan can keep ahead for a time."

With these words I leap to the ground.

Marguerite would follow, but I lift her from the horse's back and gently place her on the ground.

"Now, old fellow, get up."

I have picked up a switch from the side of the road, and this I bring down with cruel emphasis upon Sultan's flanks.

This is something the noble fellow is quite unaccustomed to, and he shows his surprise by speeding down the road like a rocket.

I do not waste precious seconds watching his progress, knowing that he will probably keep on for some little time.

The enemy is too near to dally here. We must get beyond the range of the moonlight, and hidden in the house.

Thus another question arises.

Can we get into the mill?

At any rate, we can hide in its shadow until the pursuers have galloped by, when our future course may be governed by circumstances.

I lead Marguerite away from the road.

The mill stands before us.

Glancing at it, I can see that it is well boarded up, the windows being planked over.

As to the door, I hardly think it worth while to try it under the circumstances, and only do so as a sort of involuntary action.

Judge of my surprise and delight when it actually moves under my touch.

I can open it.

Without losing a second I do this, and push Marguerite through, following myself with all speed, and closing the door again.

How is it secured?

I make use of my hands and discover a bar that stretches across as in a barn where there are double doors.

This I drop into place as easily as I can.

Then I listen. The rattle of hoofs on the road has reached the front of the mill, and there it suddenly ceases, while my heart beats as a trip-hammer at the prospect of discovery.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BAR THAT WOULD NOT MOVE.

I have hoped and expected that the pursuing outlaws would go booming past the old mill, for they certainly must hear the rattle of Sultan's hoofs down the road.

It is my vague intention, if given the chance, to desert the mill, once they are well past, follow on down the road, ready to hide at the sound of their return, and thus, in a measure, double upon them, for if they return after discovering the cheat put upon them they will undoubtedly search the old building as a suspicious place.

All this is changed.

The headlong gallop ceases.

My eye is near an opening, for I have desired to count the men as they ride past, in order that I may be able to learn when they have all returned again.

I glue my left eye to the hole.

Here they are in a group, directly in front of the mill, four in number.

Why have they halted?

Could it be possible that they have seen us enter? I remember the deceptive character of the strongest moonlight, and decide in the negative.

What then?

Ah! the mystery is speedily explained.

One man has halted the others, and he is the recognized leader, Jesse James.

They are evidently puzzled to understand, just as I am, what he means.

The thunder of Sultan's hoofs on the pike grow continually less in volume.

"They're getting away," growls one man, whom I recognize as Dick Malby, a desperate outlaw.

"Don't you believe it," replies Jesse James, coolly.

"Listen—the horse has got a new lease of life."

"That's just it. Perhaps you noticed that we didn't ear the critter for half a minute?"

"Yes."

"How did you account for it?"

"The road's soft in places."

"But not here."

"That's a fact."

"I tell you the hoss stopped."

"Perhaps you're right."

"I know it. When he went on again it was as if he hadn't any one on his back—like the wind."

"What he says is true, boys."

"It stands to reason. Why should the animal, almost in down, make a spurt like that?"

"They got off?"

"Exactly."

"And hid."

"Dick, you're talkin' now."

"Where?"

At this Jesse James turns in his saddle and points toward the mill.

He holds a revolver in his hand, and the moonlight glints from the polished steel.

The jig is up.

I may as well prepare for the tug of war, and it will be death struggle, too.

"They're in yonder old mill."

"Then, the sooner we search the place the quicker we'll know the truth."

At the words the whole quartette leave their horses and spring to the ground.

They have an ugly appearance as they advance in the direction of the mill door.

"Quite a barracks," remarks one.

"Yes. Try the door."

"It's fast."

"That's singular."

"They ain't here."

"Don't be so fast, Jim. See here."

They bend, with Jesse James, over some object on the ground which seems to have caught his quick eye. It's not hard for me to guess its nature.

"What d'ye call that?"

"A footprint."

"Dead certain."

"Did a man make it?"

"Never."

"Then 'twas a boy or a woman?"

"Yes."

"And points direct to the door?"

"Well, you're correct, Jesse."

"Then our game is in there."

They step up again, and Jesse James himself tries the mill door.

"Held with a bar," he announces.

"Then we can't burst it open."

"It doesn't matter. There's probably some other way of getting in. Let's go round."

A sudden thrill of hope flashes into my mind.

What if the whole quartette pass to the rear of the mill and busy themselves in the endeavor to find a means of entrance?

Under such circumstances, what is to hinder me from passing out with Marguerite and making good our escape?

There stand the four horses of the outlaws, unguarded. We can mount two of them, and, as a means of preventing pursuit, lead the others.

Such an artifice would be a stratagem of war.

It deserves success.

Besides, will it not be a feather in my cap to capture four fine horses from this gang of outlaws?

I imagine so.

The idea has hardly come to me before it is rudely broken up.

A fifth mounted man dashes up.

I have not noted his approach.

At sight of the riderless horses in the road he comes to a sudden halt.

"Bill!" calls a voice.

"Here, captain."

"Stay where you are, and look after the horses. Shoot to kill, if any one tries to steal 'em."

"All right."

Thus is my little plan knocked on the head.

It rose and fell, almost in a breath.

I have difficulty in repressing a groan as I see it so coolly demolished.

The desperate nature of the situation recalls me to my senses.

This is no time for crying over spilt milk.

Action is needed.

Where is Marguerite?

I have not touched her since entering the mill, and although this has only been a few minutes, still it is enough to alarm me.

I put out my hands.

She is not there.

Then I breathe her name.

No answer floats back to me.

A wild thrill passes over my frame, and in a second of time I endure tortures.

Can she be lost?

It seems incredible, and yet, if she has wandered on in the darkness, after entering the mill, while I have been busy fastening the door and listening to what has occurred outside, she may be far beyond my reach.

There is no telling what unseen dangers may exist in the old mill.

I seem to see swift races, pitfalls and traps in the floor beneath me.

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

Alarmed, I speak her name aloud, regardless of the consequences.

What is that sound?

A rustling sound reaches me. It sounds not unlike the scratching or gnawing of a rat.

Then something touches me.

Thank Heaven, it is her hand!

"Henry!"

"My darling, I began to be frightened. Where have you been, Marguerite?"

"Lost, I believe. I heard voices."

"Yes, our pursuers know we are here. They will give us trouble, I fear."

"Can they get in?"

"The door is barred, but such men cannot long be kept out of a place."

"Oh, Henry, I am afraid you have brought yourself into terrible danger."

"What of it? I would face all the fiends of earth for your sake, little girl. Say no more. I am here, and these wretches will have to walk over my dead body before they take you from me."

She does not answer in words, but her hand on my arm tells me of the love she bears me.

I must think fast.

Supposing the four men manage to effect an entrance to the mill, how am I to meet them and gain the mastery?

It is a serious question.

I have never in the past grappled with one that threatens to give me more trouble.

The darkness baffles me.

Then, again, the fact that I am totally unfamiliar with the surroundings counts sadly against me in the game.

I know not which way to turn.

Indeed, only for the narrow shreds of light that creep in through certain cracks, I should be uncertain as to the direction whence the door lies.

Another thought comes.

Why should I not issue forth and make an attempt to seize the horses?

True, there is a man guarding them, but he is only one, while if I remain in the house I will have to meet four enemies.

The thought fastens itself upon me.

I decide to try.

With my faithful revolver I believe I can down the man called Bill, provided I can advance upon him in the shadow of the mill and the trees that grow in front of it.

A shot or two, a rush upon the horses, and the thing will be done.

When the four outlaws, emerging from the mill as best they can, seek to prevent our escape, we will be dashing far down the road, and ready to laugh their efforts to scorn.

The thought inspires me.

I feel more than ever in the humor of it.

Suppose the man on the horse sees me, he will not dare to fire on sight.

There is always a chance of one of his companions returning.

Hence, I am bound to have the advantage.

I can even make assurance doubly sure by calling out as I advance such words as:

"Don't shoot, Bill!"

This will make him think it is a comrade who comes upon him.

Tricks are always legal in warfare.

The man who can use the most strategy is always the successful one.

Strange how these thoughts flit through the mind of a man in peril.

They flash with electric-like rapidity, and a whole volume can be thought in a space of time that seems incredible.

I have even arranged my plan of action, and yet no time half a minute has elapsed since this new idea burst upon me.

"Come, Marguerite," I whisper.

"Where would you go?"

"We will play a trick upon the enemy, steal their horses while they search for us, and leave them in the lurch."

"Good; but you must be quick, Henry."

Her words are true.

I can even now hear the outlaws in the back part of the mill.

They are forcing their way in through the opening near the wheel; a plank placed across the water forms a foot-bridge, and along this they come to effect an entrance.

No time can be wasted.

Whatever is done must be accomplished quickly, or all is lost.

I move forward.

The friendly cracks guide me; without their aid I must be utterly bewildered.

I reach the door.

My groping hands fall upon the bar which I dropped into position at the time of our entering the mill.

Something is amiss.

When I endeavor to turn the bar it fails to give under the pressure.

I increase the strain until every muscle in my frame is brought to bear upon it.

In vain.

The plagued bar has stuck fast, and it would take a giant to twist it loose.

Disappointment comes over me like a wave.

I groan in mental anguish, not unmixed with a sort of sullen anger.

CHAPTER XII.

TONGUES OF FIRE.

Marguerite quickly guesses that something is wrong.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I cannot open the door; the bar has become fastened in some way."

The humiliating fact makes me feel as though I would like to hide my face.

It is not very pleasant to be caught in a trap one has set himself, especially when anxious to appear to advantage.

Marguerite comes to the rescue nobly.

"There is another door over to the right."

"Do you know where it leads?" I ask.

No, Henry."

Let us try it, anyhow."

We advance upon it, while our enemies seem to be hinging their way into the mill, for I hear a board fall with a bang.

More groping ensues.

This is finally successful.

Find a doorknob and turn it.

The door opens on its hinges, squeaking dismally in so long.

No moonlight, no rush of cool air follows.

Only darkness there.

We have simply found another room.

There is no chance for us to retreat, even if we so desired, for the enemy is close upon the rear.

It is just as wise to advance.

We pass over the portal.

We still hold on to the door, which I close as quietly as possible, and grope for some means of fastening the door.

My wandering fingers have just fallen upon the key, when some heavy object comes up against the other side of the door with a bang.

There is trouble brooding.

Quick as a flash I turn the key and lock the door.

At least that barrier stands between ourselves and the ones who threaten.

Voices sound beyond.

Then other forms are hurled against the door, but it ends up bravely.

I put out my arm and draw my darling aside, fearful that the baffled outlaws may use some other means of accomplishing their end.

In this I am wise.

There is a loud detonation.

A bullet crashes through the door, and but for my protection might do damage.

Nor is this the only shot fired.

Half a dozen come rattling through the door, and lose themselves in the heavy planks at the other side of the room.

I am always of the opinion that it is a poor rule that can't be made to work both ways.

My dander is up.

I return the fire, sending a couple of leaden messengers through the door at a point where I believe they will do the most good.

This stops the firing.

Whether I have struck any of them or not, I am unable to say.

What tactics will they resort to now?

I am at a loss to say, while standing on guard ready to meet their advance.

All seems strangely quiet—suspiciously so.

When men resort to devilish work, it is strange how easily they become.

I feel sure some dreadful danger is impending, and at last can remain quiet no longer.

"Remain here out of range while I learn what sort of place we are in," I say.

Marguerite acquiesces, although it is plain that she does not like to be separated from me.

I begin my exploration.

The place we have stumbled upon seems to be a small apartment.

At one time it may have been an office, but that was long ago, when the mill-wheel went around and performed its daily grind.

Now the same wheel, once so busy, lies half-covered with moss, while the water tumbles over the rocks nearby, as if exulting at the freedom with which it passes the mill.

In a few minutes I return.

Marguerite is in the same corner.

"Have you discovered anything?" she asks, in a low whisper.

"No; but I have gone only over half of the room. I will now try the other half."

"Henry, I have found out something since you went away."

"What is it, darling?"

"Leaning against this plank, I have felt it move. I believe those men are about to make an entrance in this corner."

Quickly I place my hand upon the spot indicated, and can feel the wide board move.

What she has said is true.

But for her discovery the knaves would be on us before many minutes.

Now I have a chance to put a stop to their progress, and that right speedily.

Placing my revolver near the plank, I send a shot through, the heavy charge having power to accomplish such a result.

Then I draw Marguerite to another corner, in order to escape any return volley, but there is not a shot fired.

This seems a little strange to me.

I resume my investigations.

They are profitless.

True, there is a window in the room, but the shutter, besides being very heavy, seems to be nailed fast.

Escape from that quarter, then, is hopeless.

My heart begins to grow heavy, as though a shadow of coming events had fallen upon it.

I am a dozen times more anxious about Marguerite than myself.

If she were only safe!

Regrets are useless under such circumstances, and I can only strike forward.

When I reach her side again, I find her once more uneasy.

"Have you not detected it, Henry?" she asks.

"Detected what?"

"The smoke in the air."

Smoke!

Somehow the words almost paralyze me.

That means a fire.

Have these devils been wicked enough to set fire to the old mill?

The smoke grows more pungent.

We can make no mistake about it now.

By accident or design, they have certainly done so.

A horrible fate stares us in the face.

Burned alive, just as were the martyrs of old! Is it any wonder I feel a shiver of dread pass over my figure?

We must escape.

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

If I can only find something with which to batter down the planks that cover the window, all may be well.

I have matches.

The thought electrifies me. Why has it not come to me before?

Instantly one is struck.

I glance around.

There is a billet of wood on the floor. It seems like the rung of a chair, only larger.

I am only sorry it is so small, but, in the hope that it can be made to answer, I seize hold of the tool.

In a moment I am whacking away at the heavy planks like a crazy man.

Noise I certainly make.

Each blow sounds like the report of an old army musket, and if noise could avail, success must surely follow.

Progress, however, is slow.

The cudgel stings my hand like fire when I strike, but I persevere, and would keep it up indefinitely but for the stick going to pieces.

I try the planks eagerly.

Although loosened a trifle, they refuse to give way, nor can I, by frantic kicks, send them down.

I am baffled.

Returning again to Marguerite, I realize that the smoke has grown in intensity.

My eyes smart with it.

How about the door?

Will it do any good to pass into the main part of the mill again?

At the thought I unlock the door.

As I open it, both of us utter cries of chagrin, for the mill is a mass of flames. They leap toward us eagerly, as though desirous of finding new victims.

Seeing no chance of escape, and hating the awful sight spread before me, I slam the door to.

We have been greatly excited, but now a calm seems to fall upon us as we await our doom.

Marguerite creeps into my arms as if she would die there, and I press her loved form almost fiercely to my heart.

What a mockery this is to find her only to lose her again.

I am fierce with indignation at the cruelty of fate in thus giving me a glimpse into the fields of Paradise, only to snatch the glass away when it is at my lips.

We await our doom.

I am ready to seize any opportunity that offers for escape, but as yet none has come.

With tightly-compressed lips I see the fire eat through the partition at one end of the room.

It is no longer dark.

We can see almost as well as though daylight had suddenly come upon the scene.

There is a horrible fascination in watching the play of the fiery serpents that are destined to be the means of our destruction.

They writhe and twist, advancing and retreating, yet ever drawing near.

I live a year in that brief interval.

All thought of the outlaws had faded from my mind, and all I see now is the fiery fate that threatens to engulf us.

Escape!

I can see no hope of it around me, and yet would give all the money I own in the world for a loophole.

Can I tear up a board and beat that obstinate plank from the window?

I remember the loose board in the corner, and, with hope in my heart, spring toward the spot, intending to make a last effort.

Before I have reached the corner, to my surprise, the board falls inwardly, landing with a crash on the floor.

It is no accident.

A figure crawls slowly and painfully through the opening.

Thinking it is one of the outlaws, I raise my revolver to fire.

He makes a motion, and I fail to pull the trigger.

Although begrimed, and with his hair partly burned off, I recognize the fact that this is not one of my enemies. He has a white beard—what is left of it—and seems venerable in appearance.

He is wounded.

I remember my shot through the moving plank, and shiver as I realize that it is to my hand he is indebted for his hurt.

Who is he?

What is he?

Whence comes this man?

Ah! he advances toward me, and speaks.

"You have given up hope?"

I reply in the affirmative.

"Yet there is one chance of escape."

"I may burst the planks from the window, using this board as a battering ram."

"I'm doubtful. There is one chance, though."

"What is it?"

"Follow me, and live."

This is noble; this is generous.

Here is a man whom I have wounded, offering to save us.

Will we follow?

Such a mental question is useless since we have no other course.

I signify my desire that he go ahead, and at the same time cannot but wonder where he means to take us, since the fire seems to fill the old part of the mill, and he, himself, caught between two dangers, has only been able to escape with his life from the clutch of the flames.

Nevertheless, I call Marguerite to me.

The strange man stares hard at the seeming boy, shaking his head in a puzzled way, and then sets to work in his task of liberating us all.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HERMIT OF THE MILL.

I am virtually interested in his performance, since everything depends upon its success.

To my surprise, he bends down and seems to scratch at the floor.

Is the man crazy?

That is the first thought I catch.

Then it flashes upon me that there may be a method in his madness.

I can't raise the trap. If you have a knife, open it, Sir," he says, quickly.

spring to his side.

At once I insert the point of the blade in the crack which is plainly seen, thanks to the glare of fire.

It does the business.

As I raise the trap an inch or so the other seizes upon it as a hawk pounces on an unlucky bird.

The knife is a strong one.

He throws it back.

The next instant his head is thrust into the opening as he looks to see what the chances of escape are in that direction.

One thing strikes me gratefully.

This is the cool draught of air that comes up through the hole.

It goes to prove that the fire has not eaten its way even to the lower part of the mill.

The man who has shown us the trap seems delighted with the prospect.

"We can make it," he chuckles.

It is evident that, for the time being, he has quite forgotten his wound.

Sometimes a gunshot wound pains but little at the time it is received, a peculiar numbness settling upon the parts.

On the following day it makes amends, however.

"Follow me," he says.

With that, he boldly swings into the opening and vanishes from my view.

Looking down, I see that the ground is not more than ten feet below.

He crouches to one side, and seems to await our coming, which is certainly very good for him, and heaps coals of fire on my head.

I turn to Marguerite.

"Let me go first, and I will catch you," I say. To this she acquiesces without a murmur, and I know I can depend upon her anywhere.

Without wasting any time I drop my feet into the hole, and slide through.

As I hang from above, my feet just touch the cool ground below.

"Come," I call to my dear one above.

She hesitates not, but springs into my arms with a confidence that arouses my enthusiastic love.

How cool it seems below.

The fire has not yet descended to these depths, but, of course, it will in time.

What are we to do here?

Is this the limit of the strange man's knowledge?

If so, it will only be postponing the result.

He bestirs himself.

"So far, good. Now, come with me. Let my last action in life serve to blot out something of my terrible past," I hear him murmur.

It comes to me that if he is not a madman he at least must have done much evil in his past.

That is none of my business now.

Deliverance will be just as acceptable from such a relentless man as from an angel.

All we want is a chance to escape.

He rises again and hobbles along.

We come to a wall.

There seems to be an opening in it, and here the man takes a lantern from some peg, which he lights with a match.

Although surprised at his actions, I make no remarks, but follow with Marguerite.

My pulse glows with satisfaction.

To escape seems glorious, now that I have found my own.

The old man leads on.

Soon we reach a heavy door.

I do not see any lock, but it gives way before him, and presently we find ourselves in what seems to be a subterranean room.

It has a few comforts in it—a small stove, the pipe of which passes up through the ground, and perhaps enters a hollow tree.

Here is the home of this singular man.

There must surely be a deep mystery about his past.

First of all, I remember he is wounded.

This has come through me.

I beg him to let me examine his hurt, and am, indeed, glad to see that it is not serious.

He seems to take a deep interest in us, and asks questions, so that finally I tell him our story.

While I sit there I hear a sound.

It suddenly booms on my ear.

Again it comes, and now the old man catches it also. I see him raise his head to listen, and wait for him to speak.

"I'm afraid there is trouble coming," he said, at length. "Some one, probably your enemies, are pounding at our door."

CHAPTER XIV.

THEY COME.

This is really more than I expected, and yet I might have known that these men would not give up the case until they have fully satisfied themselves as to the fate of those who have been holding them at bay.

How under the sun they have ever discovered the subterranean passage goes beyond my comprehension, but when facts stare me in the face I never bother my head much about the means employed in reaching that end.

Some one is hammering at the door leading to our secret chamber.

They will probably soon force an entrance.

The question now is, what shall be done?

I turn to the hermit for an answer.

He springs to his feet.

When he hurries to the passage, I know that he has gone to investigate.

He is gone but a short time, and, returning, shows much concern.

"Well, what does it mean?" I ask.

"Believe the worst."

"They are our foes?"

"I heard one call another Jesse James."

"That settles it," taking out my revolver.

His eye brightens.

"You mean to fight?" he says.

"I mean to die before they take her from me."

THE JESSE JAMES STORIES.

"That pleases me. Heaven grant that no black cloud of sorrow may ever descend upon you, as it did on my once happy home."

"But what can we do?"

"We have a little time. They have sent back for an ax of some sort in order to batter in the door."

"Is there any other means of leaving this place?"

"No."

"Then we are caged like rats?"

"Wait. If we can keep them at bay, we may be able to force an exit."

"How?"

"There is not much space between the roof in yonder corner and the surface. A determined assault would make an opening through which we could escape."

"Then let us not lose a minute in arranging matters. One can keep the enemy at bay while the other works."

"That is good policy."

I start for the tunnel.

A pair of arms clasp my neck.

"Marguerite!"

"Henry, you go into peril again for my sake. Let me accompany you," she breathes.

"Never, while you can be safer here. Remain with our friend and help him all you can," I reply.

Her head falls.

"As you say, Henry, but my heart will be with you. Promise me to be careful."

"I shall take no risks that can be avoided," I reply, and leave her with a thanksgiving in my heart that I have found her again.

I plunge at once into the tunnel.

My fighting blood is up.

These outlaws have already given me much trouble, and I am resolved that when the chance comes to me I will improve it.

The only way to get the better of such pertinacious scoundrels is to shoot them down as though they were dogs, whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Having extra cartridges with me—a precaution that has served me well frequently—I have been able to replace the empty shells in my revolver, and now carry six loads.

It should be enough to hold the enemy at bay; if I get the chance to fire all of them, surely some one will be hurt.

When I reach the heavy door I stop.

Voices come from beyond.

Further progress is prevented by its presence.

I am curious to learn how the outlaws have discovered the passage, for one would think it must be choked up with the debris of fire.

Some peculiar chance has shown it to them while prowling around, and wondering what has been the fate of those left in the mill.

My reflections are interrupted.

There comes a heavy, shivering blow, as from an ax.

The crisis is near at hand.

I prepare to surprise the men.

Once before I have beaten them back from a door they would break through, and possibly I may have the good luck to do the same again.

How that ax cuts into the timber which constitutes the door.

It must be wielded by powerful arms.

Perhaps Jesse James handles it.

If so I am sorry for the notorious train robber, cause I mean to fire point-blank at the man who sends ax crashing into the door as soon as he has mad hole.

That is what I wait for now, standing there with cocked revolver and clinched teeth.

They may break in the door, but something is bound to happen about that time.

Whack! comes the ax.

It breaks through.

I instantly respond with a shot, and step back out of the way.

Will this stop them?

Not much.

Another blow follows, and I send a second bullet through the opening.

They learn that I mean business, and the work temporarily ceases, and when it once more begins I easily understand that the man who makes the blow immediately dodges to escape the shot he knows will follow.

They seem bound to come through, and even if I sag, and sacrifice myself it will not keep them from doing me harm.

If I can think of some artifice whereby they may be held in check, well and good.

I fire several more shots, and have a narrow escape for a return volley splinters the edges of the hole already made by the ax, and the leaden missiles sing close to my ears.

The work goes on.

Already the doom of the door is foreshadowed.

It creaks and groans under the punishment it receives.

Seeing what is about to come, I have the wisdom to fill the empty chambers in my revolver with fresh cartridges, so that I am in a fair condition to meet my foes.

Though they number four, yet I do not fear their onslaught.

I have reached the point that borders on recklessness, and they will find no tame victory awaiting them.

While I thus stand, expecting every minute to have a whole lot of them burst upon me, I feel a hand on my arm.

"They are coming," breathes a voice in my ear.

Good Heavens! it is Marguerite.

What fatal idea has brought her here, when she should be with the hermit?

Reproof is on my lips as I turn, but it does not find an opportunity to be heard, for the same gentle voice says:

"The opening is made; you are to come. Let us not lose a precious second, Henry."

Her words give me pleasure.

I empty my revolver right and left through the opening, and thus produce a momentary panic among the enemies.

As the last shot is fired I turn, seize Marguerite's arm, and by good luck than anything else, and hurry her away.

Through the darkness we fly.

It is not far.

The chamber is reached, and here we have the benefit of the light.

This way," cries Marguerite, with the most earnest manner possible.

I do not need these words to show me where the work has been done, for there are abundant signs yonder where old man stands.

Hurry," he calls.

The racket in the rear begins again, as the outlaws return from their fright or panic into which they have been thrown by the sudden fusillade.

They will soon be after us.

When I reach the hermit's side I find that he has done remarkably good work in the short time at his disposal.

A hole has been cut through, and seems to open above ground.

Marguerite, you are first."

I have taken the precaution to blow out the light, and it may prove of service to us should the land pirates suddenly rush in.

Marguerite does not offer any objection, for she is sensible enough to understand that it is of the greatest importance.

You go next," I say to the old man.

He would expostulate, but I push him into the opening, for I have heard the crash that tells me the door no longer proves an obstacle to the forward rush of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XV.

A DUEL OVER THE HORSES.

Seconds count at a time like this.

I can hear my heart thumping against the sides of its son without the least trouble.

It is not cowardly fear that thus causes it to pulsate so wildly, but excitement. I have always proven the fact that I am no craven; but few men can remain perfectly cool in the midst of quick and serious events, no matter how calm their exterior may appear.

The outlaws have broken in.

They will rush forward now, and quickly discover our means of escape.

I can conceive of no way in which they can be held back.

The only plan is to make all possible haste in leaving the place.

Without wasting a second I proceed to follow my leader.

The hermit has passed through the opening without trouble.

I follow.

The fact that sounds in the rear indicate the coming of the outlaws spurs me on.

I crawl out of the opening.

Figures are beside me, and a hand caresses my face as it thrills me by its contact.

It is Marguerite!

One other thing remains to be done.

Can we prevent the outlaws from following us through a tunnel which the hermit has long had dug, only waiting for the occasion to arise in order to tap it, which time is come at last.

Again the moonlight, poor as it is, aids me.

Glancing along I discover what appears to be a large log just beside us.

As I bend over I find that in reality it is a heavy timber for a house, that at some time in the past has been discarded from the mill.

Just now I am not bothering my head about the why and wherefore of things.

It is enough for me to know facts.

The log is there.

It will nicely choke up the tunnel.

He sees me bending over and intuitively guesses what I would do.

Together we seize upon the log.

Although heavy in times past, it seems to be quite rotten now.

One end is shoved into the hole.

Then we push.

It enters the opening, slides down—we hear it come to a stop part way.

The thing is done.

No one can come up through that tunnel until they have cut away all of the log, or at least allowed it to fall down.

We have cut off pursuit from that quarter.

If the outlaws mean to follow us they must go back the way they came, and thus consume precious minutes.

We turn from the spot.

Another idea has come to me.

Of what avail will this liberty be, should our enemies continue to be mounted while we are on foot?

The chance is before us to secure mounts.

Then we can defy our foes.

For the sake of the dear little woman who is all the world to me, I decide to take all the risks and secure horses.

"Wait half a minute, and come if I call."

I spring away before any one can stop me.

The steeds of the outlaws are near at hand, and I have my bearings exactly.

Have they left a man with them?

Perhaps the fellow who guarded them before has been called into the cave when it was found that we were cornered below ground.

I hope so.

The coast will then be clear for me.

A dozen quick steps bring me upon the scene.

The horses, more than we need, are fastened in a group, to the overhanging branches of a tree.

They seem to invite our selection.

It is merely a matter of chance, as all of them are doubtless good stock.

I see no guard.

Luck favors us.

Why should we not take the whole five, and thus cut off pursuit?

There is nothing to prevent.

Those I have left are further away from the partly burned mill than the horses.

To save time I might as well lead the animals to where they stand.

The horses are within my reach.

I eagerly stretch out my hand and clutch the bridle of the nearest.

One spring and I am in the saddle.

I disengage the bridle.

Next I tear loose the strap connected with the horse on my left.

Another is all we need.

I bend over to take hold of the bridle.

Just at this instant the report of a revolver rings out upon the night air.

I feel the bullet whistle past, for it stings my neck in flying by.

Some one has fired at me, and missed. The aim was good, but my sudden drop has saved my life.

Instead of rising, I pretend to have been struck, and remain in my stooping attitude.

At the same time my hand steals to where I keep my ready revolver, while my eyes seek the spot from whence the shot has come.

Whoever the party may be, he has not repeated the shot.

Perhaps he dares not.

As I lean forward, I am brought low, and a bullet might hurt the horses.

These are precious in the sight of the outlaws.

My revolver is now out.

Ah! I see him.

He stands in the shadow of the trees, and seems to await the chance of a second shot.

I cannot take deadly aim, as the circumstances will not allow it.

Still, one may do good work with a snap-shot under such circumstances.

This time it is my revolver that speaks.

At the same moment I rise.

Nothing can be done so long as I remain in that recumbent attitude.

A shot—a shock!

Great Heaven! I have been struck on the head!

Perhaps I have received my death-wound.

Determined to avenge myself, I send several shots at the shadowy figure.

Then gathering the horses, I urge the one on which I am mounted forward.

He responds nobly.

In ten seconds I am beside the others.

They have become alarmed because of the rapid firing, and imagine all manner of dire things.

My arrival with the animals reassures them.

I say nothing about having been struck with a bullet, as I do not wish to alarm Marguerite, who looks at me anxiously as I help her upon the back of a horse.

I have a terrific headache.

The bullet appears to have glanced along the side of my head, and hardly broken the skin.

It has been a narrow escape.

Perhaps the consequences may yet be serious.

There is no time to worry over this now, as my attention is otherwise taken up.

All are now mounted.

These things have consumed time, and I am not surprised to hear shouts in the direction of the mill.

The outlaws have retreated, and made good their escape from the subterranean place.

They are now calling out to the comrade left in charge of the horses.

He does not answer.

I think I know the reason why, for we have been holding a little jubilee of our own, and while he made head sing, I believe I gave him just as good, with interest.

They are probably advancing at the same time, so than we had better be off, if we mean to take advantage of opportunity.

I give the word:

The horses are urged forward.

We can laugh at our foes now, because if pursued made, only two can follow, and surely we may dispose of them.

The end is not yet, however.

A shrill whistle sounds.

Instantly the horse Marguerite is mounted on wheel and starts to return.

It is a signal from his master, Jesse James, and the animal obeys instantly.

Good fortune alone prevents a serious catastrophe from taking place.

I chance to be behind Marguerite, having taken up this position in order to be ready in case it is necessary to fire.

Understanding the situation instantly, I make a grab for the horse, seize his bridle, and hold on with grim energy.

In spite of my efforts, I cannot turn the animal around and the situation looks desperate.

The whistling continues.

Unable to hold the almost frenzied animal, I resort to the only means left.

With one arm I sweep Marguerite from the saddle as the horse moves past.

At least she is safe.

The animal bounds away toward the mill with a shrill neigh, as though he would signal to his master of his coming.

With Marguerite seated on my horse, I urge the animal forward.

Once again the pursuit is on, for I am sure our fierce pursuers will not give up the matter where it lies, having so much at stake.

If I can only save Marguerite, I care little what becomes of me. My head feels very queer, but I keep up for her sake.

CHAPTER XVI.

KNOCKED OUT.

They are after us.

I catch the heavy pounding of hoofs on the road, and the game seems just about as it was before reaching the hill, only that the old hermit is with us now.

There are a few other differences also, that may count in the end.

The horse that bears us is not my own good Sultan, nor in I depend on him as well.

Again, we are nearer the town, and there is more chance of escape.

We urge our animals on for all they are worth, and make pretty good time—that is, under different circumstances we would believe so, though just now they seem to crawl.

Faster thunder our enemies.

Shall we turn at bay?

If the hermit was a fighting man, I would be tempted to do so, but knowing that he has no fire-arms about him, makes him out of the game so far as resistance is concerned.

All depends on me alone.

With Marguerite to look after, I do not feel as though I am equal to much.

It can be taken for granted, therefore, that I watch the road eagerly for houses.

As soon as the chance occurs, we will leave our horses and take refuge in a building.

The neighborhood will soon be alarmed, if the sound of firing has not already aroused the people.

Then the outlaws must leave.

Publicity is the last thing they desire, for their designs are secret.

Clattering along in this mad style, we pass one small building.

It is all shut up, and there seems to be no chance of our effecting an entrance in the short time at our disposal.

So we rush on.

Another house appears.

It begins to look as though we are on the border of the town.

This house is also closed, though I see a man's head thrust from an upper window as we sweep madly by.

He has heard the fracas, and if so, others must also.

An inspiration seizes me.

The more racket that is made the less the outlaws will like it, and hence I shout as I ride along—shout at the top of my voice.

My words may not be distinguishable, but the effect is the same.

It must be to arouse the people.

We hope for better luck at the next house.

Something must occur very soon, for I have been wrought up to the most intense pitch of excitement, and my head feels as though it were of unusual size.

This is the effect of the shock received when the bullet struck my skull.

How much longer I can hold out depends a good deal upon the events to follow.

That our enemies still pursue us is evident, as we can hear them near by.

Their pertinacity is wonderful and I cannot but admire their grit.

Thank Heaven! other houses loom up and in the doorway of one I see a man.

This is our chance.

As we come opposite, I give the word to the old hermit, and both horses are drawn in.

Quickly we dismount.

I draw my darling after me.

The man in the doorway sees us coming, and, divining our intentions, attempts to close the door in our faces.

Fortunately, the hermit is close at hand.

Without hesitation, he throws himself into the breach, and prevents the deed.

I come to his assistance, and, between us, we push the door open.

All enter.

The man who has tried to bar us out stands there and stares as though filled with wonder at such a remarkable occurrence.

He does not offer us violence, however.

I slam the door, and grope for the bolt that secures it.

Perhaps, the outlaws may be satisfied after they recover their horses.

This is what I hope for.

Some explanation is due the unknown man for our rude manners.

"We are pursued by a gang of desperadoes, and must use your house as a means of defense. I hope you will pardon our way of doing things, but, under the circumstances, it was impossible for us to do anything else."

Before he has time to make a reply, even if he sees fit to, the thunder of hoofs out on the road announces the arrival of the outlaws.

I hasten to a window, revolver in hand.

The pale moonlight favors me again, for I can see what happens on the road.

The three men seem surprised to find their horses standing in front of the house.

They instantly seize upon them.

What next?

Will they assault the house?

I am growing weary of such work, and secretly pray that they depart without any further trouble.

They seem to consult.

Two are against one, and the majority rules in all matters of this kind.

They give it up.

We are safe!

I see them turn and go clattering down the road with the greatest pleasure I have ever known.

It will be something to boast of in the future, to say I have gotten the better of such a notorious man as Jesse James.

Just now I have not even time to congratulate myself on the success attending my efforts.

The long strain culminates.

A buzzing in my brain grows louder; then comes a snap.

I know nothing more.

My mind seems a perfect blank during the intervening time, only I remember a gentle hand bathing my heated brow.

When I regain my senses I find myself in a bed.

The room is darkened.

Who is sick?

Well, it looks as though I must have been, judging from my surroundings.

I endeavor to remember.

What has happened?

Slowly I manage to pick up the lost threads in the past, and connect them.

While thus at work, with rather poor success, some one enters the room.

Stealing softly across the room she bends over me. Again that cool hand rests upon my fevered brow, and calms my brain.

I speak her name gently, and with trembling, for fear lest she may be a dream, and vanish at the first word.

But no, she bends eagerly over, and asks me how I feel, telling me in the same breath that the doctor has forbidden me to talk.

The sight of Marguerite puts new life in me, and I am hardly able to believe that I am not as strong as ever in my life.

I insist on asking questions.

She grasps the situation, and, seeing that the only way to quiet me is to relieve my anxiety, volunteers to tell me all that has happened.

She makes a bargain.

Everything without reserve is to be told to me, on one condition—if I ask needless questions she will stop.

This I readily agree to.

It seems a bargain in my favor, since I can insist that any questions are not needless.

Marguerite settles herself near my head, where I can hold her hand.

I am delighted to see that she wears the proper habiliments of her sex, and judge that she has sent for her longings.

Only for the absence of these golden curls, the Marguerite of my memory is with me.

"To begin, Henry, I know that you must be decided to begin to hear about those men," she says.

I nod my head.

"They have done what they expected when they came to Minnesota—robbed the Northfield bank."

This makes me frown.

"How long have I been here?" I ask.

"Three days, Henry."

"And during that time—"

"The robbery was committed. A terrible fight followed, for the citizens followed them, and one man was killed on their side, while the outlaws lost several."

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

As my darling is talking, a sense of weariness overpowers me, and I feel my senses sinking into the depths of the abyss named slumber.

I pass through all manner of strange adventures, and finally, when fainting at the wayside, weary from being chased by a mad bull, I murmur the name which has been given me to conjure with.

"Marguerite—my darling—found at last!"

I awaken.

Something has touched my face.

The lamp is turned on, and the first thing I note is the figure of a man.

He bends directly over me.

Thus his face is very close to mine.

"Are you awake?" says a low voice.

"Yes," I answer, mechanically, endeavoring to collect my scattered wits.

"Pay attention to what I have to say, as your life depends on it."

These words startle me.

Am I dreaming or awake?

How comes this man in my room?

Has he been sent by Dr. Ben to lay hold of the paper which the other failed to secure?

If so, he comes too late.

I no longer have it.

Miss Marshall has it in her possession, and very likely nothing can induce her to give it up.

These things fly through my mind with the rapidity of lightning.

Whatever doubts I have are soon dispelled, for he speaks:

Your name is Lawson?"

I nod in the affirmative.

You are a detective?"

Yes."

What brings you to this part of the country?"

Some private business for Miss Marshall."

Do you know me?" shake my head in the negative.

He turns a little.

Now the lamplight falls full upon him.

Yes, I recognize the man.

Jesse James!"

He gives a disagreeable laugh.

"Guessed right the first time."

"What do you want here?"

I rather came for your life, but certain words you spoke in your sleep gave me an idea. Is that girl, who came to us as a boy, the one to whom you have long been engaged?"

She is. I have believed her dead for two years, devoured by the banker. Accident revealed to me the fact that she had gone to ransom her father. I followed, and, good fortune would have it, was enabled to save her."

"You think a good deal of her?"

"I love her better than my life, Jesse James."

"Good!"

I fail to see how this fact interests him, but time will speedily tell.

At present he has me foul. I cannot move without his eye noting the fact.

I have the common curiosity of mankind, and wonder what this man desires of me.

He and his gang are fugitives now, hunted by possessed citizens, who are determined to bring them to justice.

What have I to do with all this?

"Lawson, are you a man of your word?"

"I have always believed so."

"Because I want you to swear to something. It will save your life to do it."

"Let me hear what it is."

"You are the only living person who knows of our cave. Marguerite could not find it, and her father was taken there blindfolded."

I begin to grasp the truth.

"Well, what do you want?"

"As I said before, I came here determined to kill you in order to preserve the secret. We are badly demoralized, many seriously wounded, and it means much to us

that we have a little rest before making a further flight South."

"Yes, I comprehend."

"I want you to make a solemn promise that you will never tell a living soul where that cave is, unless some one else discovers it; also that this promise is binding on Marguerite."

"What if I refuse?"

"Then you sign your death warrant, man."

The fierceness with which he says this tells me he is in dead earnest.

One does not dare provoke Jesse James too far; it is dangerous business.

"I give you my word, but on a condition."

"You may go too far, but speak and tell me what you mean."

"I cannot promise silence on the part of Marguerite unless her father is given his liberty."

"That shall be done."

"When?"

"This very night he will be led here by one of the men or myself."

"Then I promise as you desire."

"You understand my purpose. I desire an asylum for a little while. We will disappear from this region quickly."

"The trouble is, every man is your enemy up here, while further South you have many friends because you war upon Northern capital."

"I've discovered that, and you won't catch Jesse James in this region again. One thing I will say, Lawson; you have won a plucky little woman."

"I know it, and I owe you thanks for standing up to defend her in your den. I've heard before that Jesse James never warred on women, and now I believe it. You need never fear that either of us will betray the secret of the cave."

"I am satisfied. You see, I was bound to protect the wounded, even if I had to take your life to do it. You've been sick."

"One of your bullets glanced along my skull, and brought on a little attack of brain fever; but I'm over it now, and shall be about soon."

"Repeat your promise."

"On condition that you bring John J. Sherlock to this house to-night, I solemnly promise myself and wife never to betray the location of your secret cave."

"That is enough. I will go."

He does not seem to have any fear of double dealing on my part, for he turns his back on me in leaving the apartment.

I have my revolver near at hand and could shoot him in the back.

This I do not care to be guilty of, not being anything of a coward.

He crawls out of the window and is gone.

Later on, when I come to examine this window, I find that he has made use of a wisteria vine in order to climb up.

How he knew where I was, the location of the room, and such things, I never found out.

I am well pleased.

This will save me a trip to the cave, and the banker will be released.

I sink back, but not to sleep, as my mind has become filled with excited fancies.

Marguerite comes stealing in, to see whether the night wind blows upon me.

She is dressed, and evidently has not retired.

Calling her by name, she comes to me, and while she sits there I tell her of the strange visitor I have recently had, and the mutual promise that passed between us.

When Marguerite leaves me—her presence seems to have soothed my brain—I sink into sleep.

Aroused by a loud knock on the door, I find by a clock in the room that it is nearly three.

The voice of Sherlock is heard in the land, but considerably changed.

He no longer booms out with his old-time, pompous authority.

Starvation and staring death in the face have taken this spirit out of him.

He speaks in a husky tone, and almost whispers as he begs for some food.

We supply his wants.

John J. Sherlock has received a shock, however, that sends him to a sick-bed, and, as some old trouble breaks out, he finally succumbs and passes away.

I think I scarcely need to say that Marguerite is now, at last, my wife.

The old hermit disappeared the very night I fell sick, and so we never even knew his name. We never saw him again.

When John J. Sherlock's will is read, I am pleased to learn that his property is left, without reserve, to his adopted daughter on condition that she never marries again.

This suits me exactly. There is some quibble about the exact meaning of the will, but it is decided in our favor.

Thus the banker, in dying, unintentionally repairs some of the wrong he did living.

Some men are very generous with the money they cannot take away, but while here they would squeeze a turnip to find blood.

I keep my word.

People wonder where the outlaws have been hid and how they manage to leave the State in safety while thousands are hunting for them.

I keep my counsel.

The result shows my wisdom, for I never hear of Jesse James again.

Time rolls on.

I have forgotten the old cave in the rush of business and the care of my family, when one day in some New York paper I chance to read that some young farmers, in hunting rabbits, discovered by accident the hiding-place of the outlaw gang.

Among other things found there was a skeleton, and I presume that one of the men, dying from his wounds, was left in the cave.

The raid of the Missouri outlaws upon the Minnesota bank has become a matter of history.

It was never repeated.

Dr. Ben Bailey, from whom I snatched the documents in the graveyard, finding his schemes brought to an end, vanished from view, nor was he ever seen again by any one I knew.

Fate plays strange freaks with us sometimes, and we never look back over the past without being filled with wonder, as I contemplate the manner in which Marguerite and myself were drawn together after being long separated.

The billows have long since ceased to roar around us, and we float upon the calm water of life's great ocean, bound for the distant port toward which all mankind are steering.

THE END.

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